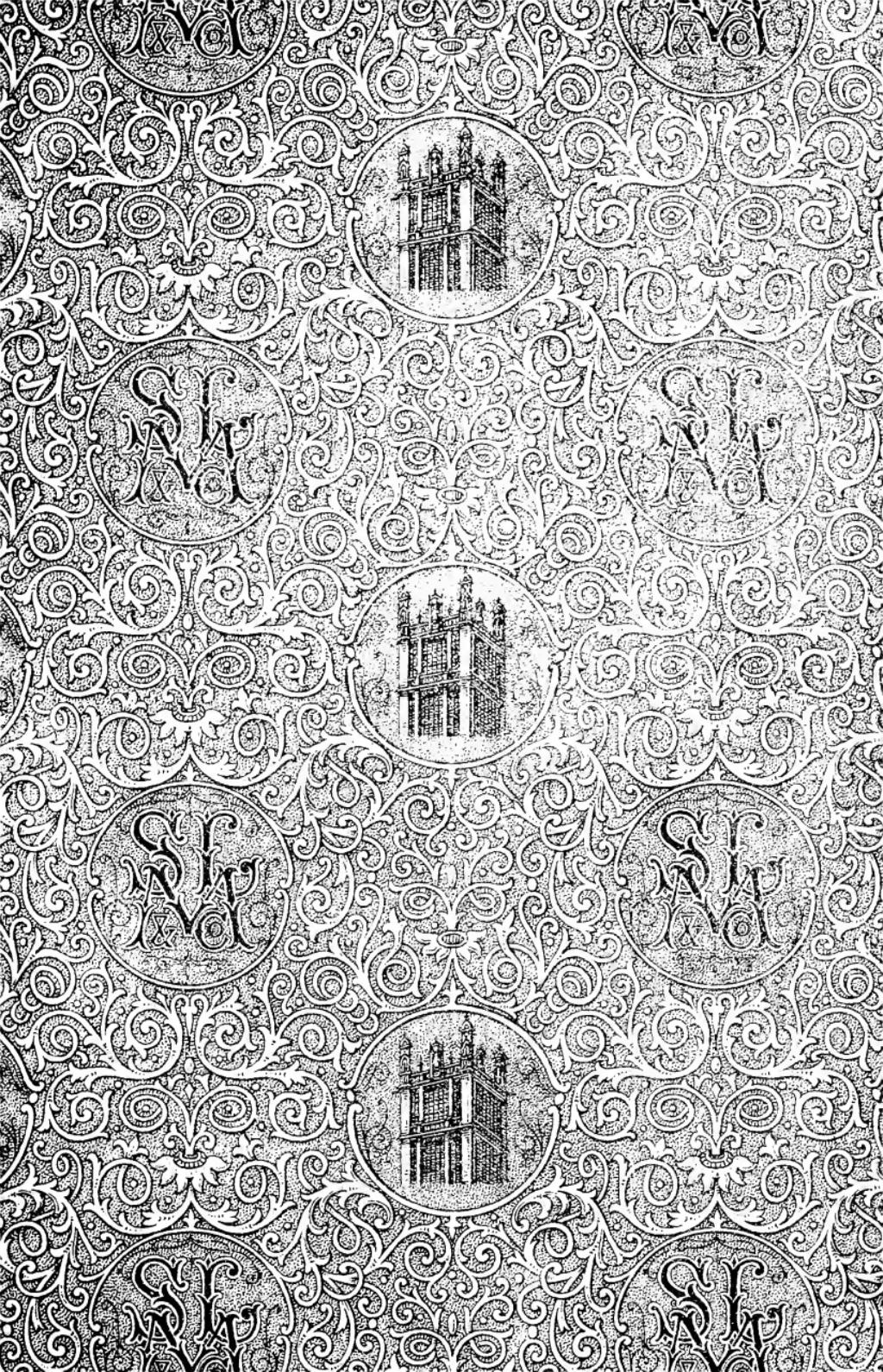


THE HANDSOME HUMES

WILLIAM BLACK





THE HANDSOME HUMES

BY
WILLIAM BLACK

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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THE HANDSOME HUMES.

CHAPTER I.

“ ALL A WONDER AND A WILD DESIRE.”

SHE was seated in the garden ; a book lay open on her lap ; her face was in shadow, save for the soft suffusion of light reflected upwards from the masses of flowers aglow in the sun ; her eyes were plunged in a profound reverie. It was not a common mood with Nan Summers, who was naturally gay of heart ; nor had it escaped the ever-watchful observation of her father. On this occasion he came along the garden path in a casual kind of way, as if he were chiefly occupied with the peonies, the columbine and larkspur,

the geraniums, and none-so-pretty, and white Canterbury-bells ; and when he spoke to her he was careful to hide his vague anxiety.

“ Nan,” said he, “ you must really give that book back to Mr. Hume. I am afraid it is too difficult for you. I have noticed once or twice that when you begin to study it, you fall into long thinking fits ; and that’s not like you, Nan ; that’s not to be allowed at all. You must not lose your high spirits, you know ; you were always splendid for that ; your eyes must be kept laughing—not troubled by any book. If you are really puzzled about any of those wild flowers, I will get somebody down from London ; it would not cost so much to get a teacher down from London for a week or two ; and then you could let Mr. Hume have his book back.”

Now on his approach she had hastily shut the volume that lay on her knee ; then she seemed ashamed of that instinc-

tive action ; she opened the Flora again ; and when she addressed her father, it was with brave eyes—though there was some touch of conscious colour in her forehead.

"To tell you the truth, Dodo," she said, "I was thinking the same thing, though for a different reason. Mr. Hume must have forgotten what was in this book ; I suppose it is some years since he carried it about with him, among the Cumberland and Westmoreland hills ; and he appears to have jotted down anything that came into his head—different phrases of translation, as if he were trying which was the best ; and these are from the Greek—so much I know, for there are references to 'Artemis and the broad-bosomed Athene,' and Arethusa that was changed into the fountain. Then there are pencillings of flowers on the margins, and bits of mountain or lake scenery on the half-pages ; I should say the book had been

a constant companion of his boyish or youthful ramblings; and it is almost like a diary, that no stranger has the right to look into.” And yet she kept turning over the leaves, in a wistful manner. She stopped at a page. “That is the water-lobelia,” she said, with an interest she could not quite conceal, “that grows up from the bottom of lakes: don’t you think it is a clever piece of drawing, Dodo? And the outline along the top—I suppose that is the mountain range: it must be a precious volume to him, to have so many memories. Oh, here is another one I happened on—a sketch of High Force in Teesdale; and he has underlined the ‘very rare’ of the plant he found there: no doubt he was proud enough. ‘*Polygala uliginosa: very rare*, margins of rills, High Force and Cronkley Fell, Teesdale, altitude 1800 feet.’ It looks as if he must have been rather solitary in his wanderings: doesn’t it, Dodo?—perhaps they were

vacation weeks—reading tours, you know ; and if he was interested in rare plants, he would go away by himself. But I don't feel as if it were quite right for me to look. You learn too much—about what he was thinking, when he was alone. And perhaps he doesn't remember. If he did remember, he would hardly give the book to me : would he, Dodo ? Oh, there is such a beautiful description of Helen of Troy—I don't know where it comes from—but fancy a lad away for a holiday, and lying amongst the heather on a hill-side, pencilling out a translation for his amusement : that's not the way of most youths. Perhaps he was thinking of publishing something ; and these were merely trials of different phrases. Only he need not have put some of the memoranda in Greek characters ; that's not playing fair ; that's hiding. And there's such a clever drawing of a terrier, barking, with its fore paws thrust out : he must have seen it—it must

be a sketch from life—somewhere near the end it is——”

But her father interposed. “ You have studied enough for one morning, Nan,” he said, in his gentle way. “ Put aside the book. I want you to come for a little walk with me; there is a letter that concerns you, and I haven’t told you about it until I could consider a bit. No, no,” he added, instantly, seeing that there was some look of alarm in her face. “ It is nothing serious; nothing very serious, that is. It is merely a matter for your own judgment; and you have such wonderful tact and discretion; you hit such fine reasons. So we will go for a little stroll, Bix way, and there will be no one to interrupt or overhear.”

If it was solitude and silence they desired, they got it directly; for they had left the house but a few minutes when they entered upon a long stretch of secluded highway, bounded on each side by a strip

of common and by tall wide-straggling hedges which were all bestarred with the more familiar wild flowers that Nan had got to know—stitchwort, speedwell, white dead-nettle, yellow dead-nettle, crane's-bill, self-heal, forget-me-not, and the like. Indeed, it was a favourite resort of hers, for it was entirely unfrequented; while the views from it were spacious and varied—up-lying fields of young wheat trembling a silver-gray in the light stirring of the wind; meadows, golden with buttercups, dipping down into hollows where the red and white cattle stood basking out in the heat, or a lazier horse sought the shadow of a friendly elm; the further heights showing interweaving lines of copse and spinney until these faded away into the pellucid air of the horizon. As for the silence, a cuckoo calling from some distant wood seemed aggressively loud; when a plover chanced to go by overhead, as they watched its erratic flight they could

detect the slight silken whistle of its wings.

“Oh, yes, Nan,” her father said, cheerfully, “it is a very pretty neighbourhood; and I don’t wonder you have grown fond of it; and so far I am glad that the little experiment I made when I took you away from the vicarage turned out all right. So far it did very well; but then, you see, Nan, there are always other possibilities that have to be faced; it’s the way of the world; and there is no use shutting one’s eyes. Crowhurst was very well for a time——”

She suddenly stopped; and she had grown very pale.

“Dodo,” she said, “are you going to send me away from you? Are you going to break up our beautiful home?” And then she went on in passionate and piteous accents that he strove in vain to interrupt: “Oh, I was afraid of it all the time! I knew I was not doing well—and I knew

you would not tell me what was amiss, for you were always so kind to me ! But if you had told me, I would have tried to do better—anything—anything rather than to be sent away from you——”

She burst into a frantic fit of sobbing and crying, and covered her face with her hands. He seemed as distressed as she was ; his patient, rather sad eyes were full of pity—and bewilderment. For a moment he stood uncertain, as if he hardly dared to interfere ; then he gently took her fingers in his, and removed them from her face, and with his handkerchief he wiped the streaming lashes.

“ Be reasonable, Nan, be reasonable,” he said, and he put his hand persuasively on her arm, and constrained her to resume their walk. “ It is nothing so very desperate. Only, certain things must be faced ; and I have often been thinking that if anything happened to me, as it might happen at any moment, I should like to know you were safe and comfortably provided for.

Crowhurst is very well ; but you know you could not live at Crowhurst all by yourself. You could appeal to Mr. Morris, no doubt ; but he would probably throw you and your small affairs into Chancery, to get rid of you, and where would you be then, Nan ? Or you could write to that Miss Deyncourt, who used to come about the vicarage—she seemed a nice kind of creature—and if she would come to be a companion for you and a housekeeper—but perhaps that wouldn't work either. And then you would be at Crowhurst alone——”

“ I won't have you talk like that, Dodo ! ” she exclaimed, “ I don't care what the letter says—— ”

“ I must talk like that,” he answered her, gently. “ I don't suppose I am going to die to-morrow, or next day ; but a tile from a roof—a smash-up of a trap—anything might happen ; and then all I should want to know, while I had any consciousness remaining, was that you were left

quite safe and sure: then I shouldn't mind anything else. You see, it is pure selfishness on my part, Nan——”

“Oh, yes, pure selfishness—nothing but pure selfishness!” she repeated, with the tears springing to her eyes again. “You have always been so selfish towards me! But where is that letter? I want to know who has put such things into your head.”

“Oh, it is a great compliment, Nan,” her father said, encouragingly. “Every young girl likes to know that some young man has been thinking of her—she likes to be asked, whatever her answer may be—an offer of marriage is something to be proud of, naturally—yes, yes, a great compliment——”

For a second she had looked up, startled; then her face was averted; and she listened without word or sign.

“And if you were inclined to say yes,” her father went on, apparently with much good-humoured content, “it would leave

you in safe and excellent guardianship, in case anything happened to me. It is only at times I am anxious, and look forward; only at times; most times you seem so happy and cheerful, especially when you are busy in the garden, that one forgets to be anxious and concerned, and one is apt to think that everything must go on happily for ever and ever. But it won't, you know, Nan; it can't; and here comes this letter to remind me that I should provide you with some safe guardianship in the future. And you needn't be alarmed; it isn't an absolute offer of marriage frightening you by its suddenness; oh, no; it is only 'permission to pay his addresses' he asks for; all fair and square and aboveboard. Perhaps a little stiff and set-up; but Dick is always like that on great occasions—he delights in proposing toasts after dinner——"

"Dick?" she repeated, breathlessly.
"Do you mean——"

“Dick Erridge,” her father proceeded, without noticing her consternation. “Oh, yes, he is a good enough fellow, though he has his little peculiarities. I suppose Dick thought it rather fine to write to me for ‘permission to pay his addresses’ to you ; but perhaps it is the proper thing ; I’m sure I don’t know. And there is one good point about Dick ; he has no prejudices such as some might have ; and his people would be friendly towards you—indeed, I am certain they would be very proud of you—if you were inclined to listen to him——”

She seemed to hear no more of Dick Erridge. She walked on as one in a dream. She looked neither to the right nor to the left. She saw nothing of the red-tiled farm-houses nestling among thick-foliaged trees and bushes ; she saw nothing of the small hamlet of Bixgibwen, which is now shortened into Bix ; nor of the turnpike, which is no longer a turnpike ; nor of the little post-office with its oddly cut box-trees.

And when her father suggested that they had come far enough and should now retrace their steps, she turned, and walked mechanically by his side. He was still talking of Dick Erridge; making little apologies for him, in a pathetic sort of way; and telling her what a good chap Dick was, after all.

But when they were come once more into that solitary highway, it appeared to dawn on her that she was expected to answer a question. There was silence—and her father was regarding her anxiously. Whereupon she said, in a very low voice, “Dodo, would it please you—would it set your mind at rest—would it make you any happier if what you are thinking of were to come true?”

For a moment he did not answer her: it was as if he were trying to swallow something. Then he laughed—rather constrainedly.

“To tell you the truth, Nan,” he said,

"I'm afraid I mightn't quite like the idea of your getting married and going away from me. But, as I tell you, such things have to be faced: it's the way of the world. And then it is a long distance ahead; there would be all the engagement-time for us to become familiar with the prospect. I mightn't even like the idea of your getting engaged; but then I should know it would be so much better for you in the future—to leave you in safe keeping——"

"And it would make you happier in your mind, Dodo?—it would put away all your anxiety about me?" she said, slowly.

"But my answering this letter does not pledge you to anything, Nan," he pointed out with some eagerness (for he perceived that she had been only half listening). "Don't you understand? You have said nothing; you need not say anything. I am merely giving him permission to come to the house—after he has made a certain explanation, fairly and openly."

“But if it all turned out in the way you spoke of—that would please you, Dodo?” she said, in the same low voice.

He could not very well answer her, for at this moment a stranger hove in sight—a tall young man who was coming along with a fine swinging stride, his stick over his shoulder as if it were a gun. And it speedily appeared that this stranger was no stranger at all; it was Sidney Hume, his handsome, interesting features slightly flushed with the brisk exercise and the heat, his eyes modestly trying to conceal the intense satisfaction given him by this encounter.

“I’m afraid I ought to apologise,” he said, with some touch of pleasant diffidence, “for intrusion on sacred ground——”

“The public highway!” said Mr. Summers.

“But I guessed you had come out in this direction, and I fancied I might catch you up somewhere,” the young man pro-

ceeded. "I wanted to tell you that I have made all the inquiries about Wantage and Uffington, and I have all the arrangements planned, so that any day you like to name we could start. And I know Miss Summers will be interested—at least I hope so——"

And naturally enough he turned and walked with them, understanding that they were on their homeward way, while he explained to them all that could be crowded into this archæological excursion. He had a frank and winning manner: when they reached Crowhurst, Mr. Summers could hardly help asking him to go in-doors. And now it was lunch-time: would he not stay and have a little bit of something with them? This proposal, it is true, caused Nan some momentary perturbation; and she fled away to consult cook and parlour-maid, leaving the two men to their own devices. But when at last Sidney was invited to go into the dining-room, it was not food or drink that occupied his mind.

The room itself, to begin with, was delightfully cool on this hot June day: there were shadowy curtains that did not altogether refuse a glimpse, through the open window, of the blaze of flowers in the garden, where a butterfly would from time to time go hoveringly past. Then the table was all so neat and bright and summerlike, the snow-white cloth adorned with sprays of young beech and Canterbury-bells. But it was his young hostess, of course, who absorbed his covert and enraptured attention, whatever he had to say about the Dragon of Wantley and the battle of Ashdown. Somehow she seemed linked with the garden out there. There was a transparency of light and colour about her face that he associated with those variegated blooms visible through the open window, white and red and white and pink, and all shining and shimmering in the sun. What did he care about such base things as caviare, or galantine, or cold gooseberry

tart? He said, "Oh, thank you!" and took everything he was offered; and ate nothing. The very gates of heaven appeared to have been opened; the choirs were singing; so that all the golden air outside was pulsating with the wonderful melody, while echoes of it seemed to wander in and fill this mystical, half-shadowed, enchanted room. It was but the night before he had been sunk into the deeps of despair; now the mere magic of her presence seemed to raise a delirious joy within him; the unattainable was not so hopelessly unattainable; she was near; she was his friend; sometimes her timid eyes were turned towards him, and they were not unkind. Caviare, oatcake, salad!—for one who was feeding on honey-dew and drinking the milk of Paradise, with a heart as hardly yet capable of realising its own amazing auguries and demands.

They went out into the garden, and he positively refused to poison the sweet air

with a cigarette. She showed him the extraordinary luxuriance of roses that was promised them, when the lilacs and laburnums had gone; even now the clustered buds were bursting, and the deep crimson and pink and yellow-white involutions of velvet petals were beginning to uncurl. She went and brought the Flora, and rather shyly told him she shrank from prying into these confidences; but he said, simply enough, that he would rather like it, so long as the boyish trash did not bother her. And finally, before he left, he had persuaded Mr. Summers to fix the very next morning for their projected visit to Wantage, and Uffington Castle, and White Horse Hill.

That proved to be another day of new and strange and marvellous experiences. For one thing, as soon as he had constituted himself their guide, he found but little difficulty in entertaining them; they were quite delightfully ignorant of this neighbourhood in which they had recently settled.

They had never heard of the Parliamentarian siege of Greenlands ; nor of Mary Blandy, her cruel heart, and unhappy father ; nor of Nell Gwynn's bower of yew in the neighbourhood of Nettlebed, which is only a little way beyond Bix ; nor of the well into which, as the legend goes, 'Poor Nelly,' for some unexplained reason, threw her jewels. But these trivialities of reminiscence were soon discarded. The human nature of the living and present moment is so much more important, is so transcendently and overwhelmingly interesting, when one is four-and-twenty, and when there is a pair of speedwell-blue eyes, not so far away, showing pleased attention and smiling kindness. There was an unending fascination in finding out her opinion on this point and on that. He freely volunteered his own, hungering for acquiescence, and yet cunningly contriving beforehand that it would be easy for her to acquiesce. He spoke without reserve about himself,

his pursuits and plans ; and he told her a great deal about his mother, with obvious pride. He was apparently addressing two, but in reality only one ; and he was talking with an animation quite unusual with him ; he was eager to impress, eager to elicit assent ; and all the time he was studying, with a wild infatuation that was stealing his senses away, the changing and varying expression of her flowerlike face.

Meanwhile Mr. Summers had for the most part remained seriously and attentively silent. For he was only now beginning to perceive and understand the social position and surroundings of this young man who had, as it were, dropped upon them from the clouds. Hitherto, during the brief acquaintanceship that had on one side been so sedulously cultivated, he had had no such chance. To him Sidney Hume was merely a friendly young fellow who had offered his assistance in the Fair Mile of the Oxford Road, who had walked

on as far as Crowhurst, who had casually been asked to step in to look at an Ordnance Survey Map, and who had since seemed extremely anxious to continue on friendly terms with both father and daughter. He was modest and well mannered; there was neither self-assertion nor unwarranted intrusion; his chief desire appeared to be to cultivate this companionship that had come about in such a haphazard way. But if Jim Summers, as his former associates were in the habit of calling him, had been fully aware of the facts of the case, it is quite certain he would never have thought of asking Sidney Hume to step into his house, if only to look at an Ordnance map. There were reasons, apart from his own natural reserve and humility, which would have led him to decline this proffered acquaintanceship. But then he did not know; and the young man had subsequently been so persistent—and likewise so straightforward and amiable and un-

assuming; and then, above all, Nan had seemed pleased. It was for her sake that he had consented to come on this archæological expedition, though small concern had he with Roman roads and King Alfred's battles. And now—now that the pretext of history and folk-lore had been almost abandoned—now that this young man, by little inadvertent touches from time to time, was revealing to these two the world he lived in, one of the two had found food for grave reflection, and was perhaps secretly considering how this all too sudden and fervent friendship could discreetly, and without pain or rudeness, be brought to an end.

But as for Sidney Hume, the unwitting cause of this disquietude, he was troubled by no such forecasts; these present moments, each one of them filled with magic and delight, were enough and more than enough; the long and happy day sped quickly. And even when, late in the

evening, he had reluctantly bade them good-bye, and returned to the solitude of his own home, there was no diminution of the bewilderment and transport that occupied his brain. ‘If music be the food of love, play on;’ and even in this silent house he knew where to find such celestial sustenance; he would attune his ear to listen to the subtle cadences and varied and perfect melody of Tennyson’s ‘Maud’—a poem for which he had the profoundest admiration, which he had championed and panegyrised in season and out of season. He went and fetched the green volume, and took a seat outside the honeysuckled porch. Late as it was, the evening was still golden and clear; but the sounds of the day were growing fewer: occasional footfalls on the gravel road; homeward-going children calling to each other across the bridge; the methodical clink and clank of some four-oar or eight-oar coming swiftly along through the steely

blue-gray of the river, under the brooding poplars and willows. The meadows were empty now; and one of the houses on the wooded heights beyond had sent out its first orange ray.

* * * * *

These well-remembered lines, these haunting phrases, seemed to increase his exaltation of spirit; they appeared naturally to belong to this new and hitherto undreamed-of atmosphere that had come into his life. Passionate utterances that heretofore he had regarded from the merely literary point of view, he now understood and recognized in another sense: he also had tasted of ‘the cruel madness of love’; he also was filled with unrest, and longing, and dreams of heroic self-sacrifice if only that wonder of all wonders—a girl’s heart inclining towards him, her choosing him out of all the rest of the world—could come true. In his case, of course, there was no ‘Queen Maud in all her splendour,’

nor any ‘gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls,’ nor yet had he heard ‘A voice by the cedar-tree, In the meadow under the Hall !’ But yet—sitting in the waggonette that morning—the simple costume of lilac and white that Nan Summers wore appeared to him to have some strange charm and bewitchment about it; and her voice revealed the most heart-searching music, even in that little peculiarity of lengthening certain vowels. She did not say ‘ta-own’ or ‘da-own’; she said ‘town’ and ‘down,’ with just such slight dwelling on the diphthong as made the sound entirely entrancing in his ears. And no longer, as he thought of these things, was he in the deeps of despair: the unattainable might not be so hopelessly unattainable?—her eyes, timid, unsearchable, maidenlike, had they not once or twice, as they were turned towards him, said something to him, however unwittingly? Or was that, too, but another

illusion—a frantic hope rather than any possible fact?

Then, again, as he turned over these pages—in the gathering dusk—the gas lamps now glimmering through the trees—the last of the returning boats become phantomlike on the wan bosom of the stream—here, at last, he came upon the lines that spoke more directly of Nan.
'Shine out, little head, sunning over with
curls, To the flowers, and be their sun.'
Why, that was Nan herself!—if only the reader, himself or another, would remember that the outward lustre of those tags and strays of hair that clustered about her neck and ears seemed to be but part of the general sunniness of her nature and disposition. A radiant temperament; well-wishing towards everybody; grateful for the beautiful things of the world; grateful, above all things, for any affection shown her. And as regarded the future, what

might be the strange events lying behind that mystic veil?—‘I have led her home, my love, my only friend’? But such things are blinding to the mental vision; and leave one breathless.

Shut up the book: it is time to go in-doors and summon lights to the dark and hollow rooms. For now the last of the skimming and dipping martins has left the neighbourhood of the bridge; the quivering gold reflections on the stream burn amid shadows of an oily blackness; a deathlike silence has fallen upon the tall poplars; and far away in the south, from behind the wooded hills, the young moon glides slowly into the transparent sky, to keep watch over the night.

CHAPTER II.

THE BULL-DOG.

WHEN Mr. Dick Erridge, having ‘done himself well,’ as he would have phrased it, at the Red Lion, Henley, stepped into his tall dog-cart to drive out to Crowhurst, he was in a most complacent mood. His costume, as he had carefully satisfied himself at various mirrors, was elegance itself ; the gorgeous orchid in his button-hole denoted a generous, not to say lavish, mind ; while this turnout, from the rosettes at the leader’s head to the brilliant boots of the groom, was at all points faultlessly trim. It is true his equanimity was nearly upset, and himself also, just as he was turning into Bell Street ; for here a nursemaid,

overcome by the appearance of two youths in blazers and boating-flannels who had passed along the highway, was gazing vacantly after them, while she pushed an unheeded perambulator right out into the middle of the road. A collision and general smash-up seemed inevitable; and indeed Dick Erridge only avoided it by jamming his leader on to the opposite pavement, and hauling sharp at his wheeler, while he uttered a yell fit to have woke the dead: thereupon the startled maid, recalled to her senses, hastily retreated with her precious charge; a good-natured bystander got hold of the horse—which had probably been surprised to find itself looking into a shop window—and led it back into the thoroughfare; and then the charioteer resumed his way, no doubt mentally uttering furious maledictions. But it was a pleasant afternoon; Dick was of an easy-going and self-satisfied nature; and by the time he was bowling along the Fair Mile

he had forgotten all about the nurse-maid, and the perambulator, and the innocent babe that had so nearly come to an untimely end.

When he reached Crowhurst he found the gate open, so that he was enabled to drive up to the front door; but in passing he had caught sight of Mr. Summers standing by the gable of the house; and thither, when he had surrendered the dog-cart to the groom, he accordingly betook himself, without going inside. Mr. Summers was alone, a hammer in his hand, while he contemplated a rope-ladder that depended from an open window above.

“Perhaps you can help me with a suggestion,” he said, as soon as he had greeted his visitor. “This is a fire-escape I have just fixed in Nan’s room up there: in case of an alarm, all she has to do is to throw up the window, fling out the ladder, and get down. Feel this rope: isn’t it soft and silky?—it wouldn’t hurt

the hands of an infant. But I'll tell you what would ; and that's the thorns of that rose-tree and the bars of the lattice-work ; and I've been considering. I'm afraid she'd make a desperate fuss if she knew I was going to tear down the roses and the lattice : I'd have to do it some time she was in at Henley. Or perhaps if I could get some projection put along the window-sill, it might keep the ladder clear—— ”

Dick abruptly changed the subject.

“ I was at the Albatross Club last night,” he observed, significantly.

“ Oh ? The Parkes-MacQuarrie affair ? ”

“ The grandest sight I ever beheld ! ” the podgy, pale-faced little man continued, with great enthusiasm. “ The very grandest ! Let's get into some quiet corner and I will tell you all about it—— ”

“ Well, we can walk up and down here — Nan is in-doors,” her father said—and they rather moved away from the house.

“ The grandest thing you could imagine ! ”

Dick Erridge continued, with quite genuine exultation. “And the newspapers ain’t in it this morning: that’s why I wanted to come and tell you. Lord Mount-Lathom addressed the reporters—the gentlemen of the press, don’t you know—flattered them up to the nines about their prudence and discretion—hoped they would not mention the name of any one present—and would they be so kind as not to speak of a fight, but of a contest with gloves—in fact, he wheedled and humbugged them all over the place. Then, at eleven-thirty sharp, in came the two heroes—both of them looking magnificent——”

“I thought MacQuarrie had gone something amiss,” Summers said, casually. “There was a rumour of the kind——”

“A fortnight ago—a fortnight ago,” the other rejoined, in his eager haste. “They eased him off a bit, and got him all right: I assure you, you never saw two men looking in better condition—a sight for sore

eyes, it was ! Of course the Tasmanian is far the bigger man—the Devil they generally call him now ; but the Englishman looked just as fit as a fiddle—proved it, too—and game he was—game, I tell you—for you never saw such hammering as he stood up to in the last round—just able to keep his feet, but facing up—facing up like a good 'un—until that Devil of a Tasmanian got the auctioneer home, and it was all up with poor Parkes. Never mind : he gets £500 out of the £3000 ; and he's won the reputation of being about the pluckiest fellow that ever put on gloves. And it wasn't merely his standing up to be hammered ; MacQuarrie, the Devil, hadn't it all his own way from beginning to end—not by no means ; in the fifth round there were some grand exchanges, and the Tasmanian, I can tell you, got all he wanted, and about two-penn'orth more. My heavens, Parkes let him have a right-hander on the ribs that might have felled

an ox ; but there wasn't much cheering, mind you, among all those noble sportsmen in evening dress—oh, no—there was too much oof at stake—they were too anxious about what was going to happen to let their efflorescent sentiments carry them away. Really, really, you should ha' been there ! " he exclaimed, in a sort of ecstacy. " It was beautiful ! All so quick, and sharp, and businesslike ; each man doing his very d—dest in every second of the three minutes ; then down in the chair, with sponging and fanning ; then up again—like two gladiators. Hammering, no doubt —yes, there was hammering in the last round—and I dare say some Johnny of a curate might have turned pale when the Devil caught Parkes a tremendous punch in the throat ; but I tell you in all the thirty-five minutes there wasn't one-fifteenth part of the lumping brutality of a football match. Skill and science, sharp as a needle, just delightful to see ; and though I'm an

Englishman, though I'm no Colonial, what I say is, ‘ Bravo, Parkes, *and* bravo, MacQuarrie ! ’ Grand men, both ; and I for one admit that the best man won—though I lost my little bit through his infernal slogging.’’

His enthusiasm seemed to sober down a little at this last recollection ; and it was in a calmer mood that he went on to give Mr. Summers further particulars of this great occasion, especially dwelling on the number of titled persons present, and the extreme elegance and propriety of the proceedings. To all this Summers listened in his usual grave and attentive way ; then he said, looking towards the house :

“ I wonder what has become of Nan ? Suppose we go in-doors and see if she has got a cup of tea for you.”

“ One word,” Dick Erridge interposed, in an undertone. “ I quite understand your letter—and awfully obliged, too. You trust to me. A nod’s as good as a wink. I

wouldn't do anything—don't you know. But I wanted to put myself right with you—all fair, square, and aboveboard. And I've come out at once, just to show you. I know what's what. I'm not that kind. Not much."

By the time these enigmatic sentences had been uttered the young man and his elder companion had reached the house; and, with a little adjustment of his collar and a final shooting-out of his cuffs, Dick followed his host in-doors. They found Nan in the drawing-room, where she was engaged in arranging some tall feathered grasses. She had heard the dog-cart arrive, and had guessed who this visitor must be.

"Well, this time I've got safely out," said he, in an airy manner which was meant to give her confidence. "No accident this time."

"An accident? — driving?" she said, regarding him with curious eyes.

"Oh, no. Fact is, the last time I thought of paying you a visit, I had a little misunderstanding with Henley Bridge, that's all; and the bridge got the best of it. I thought I would put in an hour or so on the river; and I was getting on first-rate—very well indeed—when it occurred to me to try to burst Henley Bridge in two. The bridge burst me in two—or my boat, anyway; and chucked me into the Thames; and if it hadn't been for a most noble youth who jumped in and caught me by the scruff of the neck, I should have been a goner, and no mistake. That's where the awkward part of the story comes in, you see. Thames water is a poor drink; there's no stimulus in it, but quite the reverse; and I suppose I was rather sick and sorry when I got out, for I let that young fellow go away without even saying 'Thank you' to him. What a precious bounder he must have thought me! And then, when I discovered his address, and went along to apologise, I

was in a suit of waiter's clothes : a regular beast of a predicament—and of course he wouldn't dine with me. But I'll put it straight. I'll call on him when I go back to Henley this evening. One doesn't like to be considered bad form, you know. And this young fellow is rather a bit of a swell—at least his people are : I've been making inquiries. Of course when you're lugged out of a hole, it doesn't matter whether the gaff is of iron or of silver—still—— ”

“ Did you get to know his name ? ” said Nan, in wild surmise.

“ Oh, yes—Hume—Sidney Hume. A very good family,” the young man went on. “ No doubt that is merely a country house of theirs. And if I should meet him again I hope I sha'n't be quite such a Guy Fawkes Guy as I was when he last saw me.”

“ We know that Mr. Sidney Hume slightly,” said Nan's father—for she herself, anxious only that her extreme em-

barrassment should remain unobserved, did not dare to speak. “We made his acquaintanceship in an accidental sort of way; and since then he has called once or twice; indeed, we went on a long expedition with him yesterday, and I should not at all wonder if he walked over this afternoon, to have a bit of a chat over it.”

“Oh, you know him?” exclaimed Dick Erridge, in amazement. “But when I mentioned your name to him, and asked him if he had heard of you as a neighbour, he said no!”

“The acquaintanceship, such as it is,” said Mr. Summers, quietly, “is quite recent.” And then he added, perhaps in view of certain unconfessed speculations of his: “Quite a chance acquaintanceship—and perhaps we have about seen the end of it.”

Nan sat silent—silent and troubled, notwithstanding the airy unconcern with which the young man continued the conversation. She did not know what this visit might

portend; nor what was expected of her; nor how far her mere remaining in the room might be taken for acquiescence. And here at the same moment was her father intimating that their brief association with Sidney Hume was about to cease. A sense of some impending calamity seemed to weigh upon her; she could not listen to this talk about the Albatross Club; those names he mentioned—as though half the peerage and baronetage were familiarly known to him—were but as vain echoes to her, conveying nothing.

Then a sound caused her heart to stand still: it was a footstep on the gravel outside. The bell rang. Some one entered the house; the drawing-room door was thrown open; a name announced. And when Sidney Hume appeared, tall, handsome, self-possessed, it was on her that his eyes first fell, it was to her that his steps were instinctively bent. Then he turned to her father. Then to the stranger.

But there was no need of an introduction; and indeed Dick Erridge was so eager and anxious to remove from himself, finally and for ever, the imputation of having done anything not quite in accordance with the proprieties, that he instantly proceeded to make the profoundest apologies for his apparent bad manners; he renewed his explanations; he expressed an almost abject gratitude; until Sidney, who had a kind of direct way with him, grew impatient.

"You were in no danger at all," he said, briefly. "There were one or two people standing by who could have picked you out."

"Yes, but they didn't, and you did," the young man insisted.

"You might have been in danger on a regatta-day," Sidney observed, with a laugh. "For you'd have had about twenty boats and half a dozen steam-launches all charging down on the top of you, to rescue you: that

would have been dangerous enough." And therewith he turned to Nan, and began to ask her whether she had quite recovered from her driving and climbing of the day before; while Nan answered him with far less than her usual light-heartedness—in fact, with self-conscious face and averted eyes.

But Dick Erridge, having acquitted himself of the suspicion of being a 'bounder,' having grovelled sufficiently, had thereafter no intention of 'taking a back seat,' as he himself would have said. He had much too wholesome an opinion of his powers of entertaining; he wished to show this stranger the familiar footing he held in this household; and, above all, he naturally desired to display a little, with the eyes of Beauty looking on.

"No barrel-organs to bother you here, Mr. Summers," he observed, in his chirpy and cheerful fashion. "No 'Lambeth Lotty'—nothing o' that kind to disturb

you. But I tell you it's very odd how quickly a comic song that catches on at the halls—and ‘Lambeth Lotty’ is the last—it's very odd how quickly it is laid hold of by the upper ten; it's rayther mysterious, as the sailor said of the sausages; but I notice that there are a good many curtained boxes at the halls nowadays. Well, why not? Why shouldn't the tiptoppers like a bit of fun as well as anybody else: it can't all be state concerts at Buckingham Palace. I don't know whether they still have midnight tobogganning on tea-trays down the staircases of country houses—that was a high old amusement, and no mistake!—but anyhow, last Sunday evening, at the Granville Gallery—as swell a gathering as you could get in London—when Jack Rintoul sang ‘Lambeth Lotty’ they gave him a perfect roar of a chorus. At least so I hear; for I wasn't there myself,” the young man observed, honestly. “And why shouldn't they?

The air isn't half a bad one, and the chorus is ripping. Just listen to this."

He went to the piano, opened it, sat down, and ran his fingers lightly over the keys. Clearly he was quite a clever and facile pianist: driving tandem was not his sole accomplishment. But when he had dashed off the air, which was a flimsy, catching kind of thing, the temptation of the chorus was too much for him—he burst into song :

“ O Lotty,
Now you're dotty,
For carrots isn't in it with your hair ;
And your bonnet's all askew,
And your nose is rather blue,
And they'd run you off the grounds at Greenwich
Fair.”

“ Then there comes in a bit of a dance, you know,” he said, and his fingers still ran up and down the keys, “ though I fancy that would be left out at the Granville Gallery. But can you wonder that the people caught at the chorus ? It isn't half bad, you know.”

And again he sang, with some additional touch of staccato emphasis :

“ O Lotty,
Now you’re dotty,
For carrots isn’t in it with your hair ;
And your bonnet’s all askew,
And your nose is rather blue,
And they’d run you off the grounds at Greenwich
Fair.”

He did not vouchsafe them any further information about the young lady of the south side who seemed to have been overvain of her personal appearance ; he left the piano and jauntily resumed his seat ; and was presently engaged in proving that the very smartest people (as he called them) would flock to the Music Halls if only they had sufficient courage, and that they only went to see Shakespeare, as they went to church, because it was considered the right thing to do. Dick had plenty to say for himself ; he was determined to shine—and he shone.

Tea and cake and such things brought

some little excuse for a further prolongation of their stay ; but at last both the young men rose to go, and Dick Erridge was so kind as to offer to drive Sidney into the town—an invitation which, for reasons, was promptly accepted. For hardly had they got away from Crowhurst, making for the Oxford Road, when Sidney said,

“ You seem to have known Mr. Sumners for a considerable time.”

“ Oh, yes,” his neighbour answered, with some pride. “ A goodish bit now—a goodish bit.”

“ What was he ? ”

A simple question ; but Dick Erridge hesitated. And then the snob in him (or perhaps some dimly felt generous instinct : who can tell ?) caused him to lie.

“ Oh, a trainer—a well-known trainer,” he answered ; and then he quickly went on to add : “ Of course he has retired from all that now. He has made his little pile, you know ; a warm man, in his quiet way.

And made it fair and square, too. ‘ Honest Jim Summers,’ as they used to call him.”

“ Honest Jim Summers ? ” repeated Sidney, with a trifle of surprise. “ That sounds rather familiar, doesn’t it ? ”

“ In a fashion it does, yes,” observed Dick Erridge, lightly. “ But it’s nothing to say *against* a man, don’t you know. Might be worse things said against a man than that. Rather a compliment, in its way. It isn’t every man who has had to do with race-horses leaves the same reputation behind him.”

“ I dare say not. Did you know his wife ? ” Sidney proceeded : he was longing to speak about Nan, but could not, somehow.

“ Oh, no,” his companion made answer. “ Before my time. But I’ve heard of her. A terrible business—railway accident—the mother and eldest child, a boy, killed—this one, this girl, almost an infant, saved. It broke Jim Summers all up, as I’ve heard ;

he went away to Australia for a while ; and then he came back, and simply devoted himself to the remaining child, having her carefully educated, and looking forward to the time when he and she could start house together. And, now they are at Crowhurst, they seem to hit it off pretty well, don't they ? In my rambles through this vale of tears I've seen proud parents fond of their children ; but the like of Jim Summers with regard to his daughter I have never seen. He just worships her—thinks of nothing else —cares for nothing else ; and she is just as much given up to her beloved Dodo, as she calls him. Quite refreshing, in these cynical times. There's one thing pretty sure : if any man ever harms that girl he'd better keep away out of the reach of Jim Summers's fist—he'd better keep far, far away—he'd better get to the outermost edge of the earth, and hide in a hole there, and not come out till the Day of Judgment.”

Sidney hardly knew whether or not to

resent this tone : after all, there was in it some little touch of human nature, despite its self-sufficient flippancy. But one more question he would ask.

"I suppose her mother must have been a very beautiful woman ? " he said.

"So I have heard," the young man answered. "But of course there's no speaking about her to Mr. Summers. There are some things too awful : I can see now that a sudden railway whistle seems to go through him like a knife, just as if he were stabbed. Come, get along, Tommy ! " This last interjection to his leader, accompanied by the lightest touch of the whip, for now they had entered upon the broad expanse of the Fair Mile.

When at length they had got into the quiet little town, Sidney managed to shake off his companion, notwithstanding his reiterated proposals and invitations ; and, leaving Dick Erridge at the Red Lion, he pursued the rest of his homeward way on foot. He

wished to be alone ; he was unaccountably perturbed and anxious. This visit of the afternoon had left him a prey to vague apprehensions. For one thing, Nan had appeared troubled and concerned ; all her friendliness, her light-heartedness of the day before had fled ; he had hardly ever encountered her eyes. And then, again, the familiarity with this household professed by Dick Erridge seemed to make of him, Sidney, something of a stranger. At this very moment he would fain have gone away out to Crowhurst again, to assure himself that the speedwell eyes had no real reason for avoiding his. A dumb, unappeasable longing possessed him—a yearning of the heart that tortured him ; the red and gray house among the beechwoods seemed now worlds and worlds remote. Books, when he tried that distraction, were useless ; the printed page gave him back nothing—not even the story

‘ told
By a cavern wind unto a forest old.’

He went out into the garden. It was a placid evening. The tall poplars and the pendulous willows stirred and no more than stirred; the smooth, oily olive-green of the river was only broken when a boat came shooting along from under the yellow arches of the bridge. The hush of the twilight was falling over the wide meadows and the wooded hills; voices sounded distant; the coming night was not far off. Peace without, but no peace within; rather an ever-increasing and unreasoning distress, that was none the less real that its origin was veiled. For this young man had tried a fall with ‘implacable Cypris, Cypris terrible,’ and been sadly overthrown.

The night that followed the dying out of the day was still and calm, and, in these river-side gardens, laden with scent. A mother swan that had been troubled about her inattentive cygnet had long ago persuaded her gray offspring to go away home, the two of them disappearing like ghosts

into the shadows. The last of the gossiping villagers had left the bridge ; the last of the boats had been drawn up on the bank. And as Sidney, moved by some impetuous and occult desire, passed along the almost empty street, and ascended the Gravel Hill, on his way out into the country, a silver half-moon was shining clear in the southern heavens, and in the interstices of the curdled clouds overhead—in the deep violet-blue spaces—here and there was visible an occasional star.

He did not know why he had come hither, except through an over-governing restlessness. As he wandered on, the voiceless beechwoods surrounded him with their mysterious gloom ; then again he emerged into the wan moonlight on the open heights. Drawing nearer and more near to Crowhurst, he hesitated from time to time, uncertain whether to advance or recede, and yet ever drawn forward by this secret and uncontrollable magnetism.

What harm could there be in some far-off glimpse? Or might there not be a red ray in some solitary window? Though indeed the world appeared to be all asleep now.

In course of time he approached the gate, and he did so breathlessly. He was afraid of his footfalls on the highway, the silence here seemed so intense. Intense also was the silence that lay over the slumbering house; certain gables, with lattice-work and roses, were palely visible in the moonlight, the rest buried in deepest shadow. Nor was there any faint crimson glow in any one of the windows: he grew a little more confident: he even advanced to the gate, and idly placed a hand on the topmost bar.

At this very moment a figure stepped out from the blackness of the rhododendron bushes and confronted him.

“Yes?” was the single word of challenge, uttered quite quietly.

And for a second the sudden apparition startled Sidney beyond measure—he in-

voluntarily raised his arm, to strike or to defend; but the next instant he perceived that this was Mr. Summers, who was regarding him calmly. And there had been simultaneous recognition on the other side as well.

“Oh, Mr. Hume?—I beg your pardon,” Summers said.

“No, I had no intention of breaking into your house,” Sidney rejoined, with less embarrassment than might have been expected. “The fact is, I came wandering away out on so fine a night—and stopped for a minute to have a look——”

“And if you are going on, I may as well take a bit of a turn with you,” Mr. Summers said, opening the gate and stepping into the highway. “I don’t know whether Nan is asleep yet—she might be surprised to hear voices.” And then, when they had gone a little way, he resumed: “We rarely have any one come along this road so late at night; and I heard you some distance

off. You see, I'm rather fond of loitering about outside the house, just to make sure that everything is safe and sound. I'm Nan's bull-dog—so I tell her. It's my business to see that no stranger comes near——”

“It would be uncommonly awkward for the stranger,” said Sidney, “if he had any felonious intent.”

“And I'm sure I ask your pardon, Mr. Hume, for suspecting you,” Mr. Summers said, quite humbly.

“Not at all!—it's the other way round,” the younger man made answer. “I had no business to be roaming about the country at such an hour. I wonder if Miss Summers quite understands how vigilant a guardian she has got?”

“I think Nan trusts me,” her father said, simply; and then he added, as if by way of excuse: “You see, it is a kind of amusement for me. I like it. And it does not harm any one.”

So they went on for some time, chatting pleasantly enough, until they came to a parting of roads, and here Sidney said good-night, for he was returning to Henley by the Fair Mile. Soon the last of his footfalls were absorbed in the prevailing silence of the beechwoods and the dark. And then Nan's bull-dog made his solitary way back to Crowhurst.

CHAPTER III.

AN ENEMY IN THE PATH.

BUT although Mr. Summers had professed to treat this encounter with Sidney Hume as an ordinary and trivial thing, in reality it caused him profound alarm. For it needed but little acquaintance with human nature to perceive that this aimless night-wandering, this lingering by the gate, was nothing other than the restless, agonised vagary of a lover; and here, indeed, was a climax that had not been foreseen. Yet the dismay with which he regarded this discovery had in it no trace of ignoble jealousy or selfishness. He had already brought himself to face the possibility of Nan's getting married; nay, he had persuaded

himself that it was a desirable thing she should make her choice ; he had told her that he himself would feel happier and better content if he saw her life fairly settled. But he had been thinking of Dick Erridge and of Dick's polite request for 'permission to pay his addresses' ; he had not been thinking of this other young man, whose association with them he had just been proposing should cease altogether. Not that any one was too good for his bright-spirited, affectionate, laughing-hearted Nan ; and in other circumstances he might have been pleased to see her provided with a husband as handsome, and well-born, and modest, and good-humoured as this Sidney Hume ; but his schemes for Nan's future had never contemplated her entering a social sphere where she would run the risk of being treated with patronage, if not with scorn. This midnight adventure showed him that he had resolved none too soon on dropping an acquaintanceship that

had on one side at least been too diligently cultivated: the young man must betake himself elsewhither to choose for himself a mate.

He passed an anxious night, and the morning still found him in grievous perplexity. Would not the straightforward way be to go direct to Sidney Hume, confess his suspicions and fears, and explain why this brief companionship should at once and definitely cease? Or would not that be in a measure compromising Nan, whose name he did not even wish to mention? Then, again, ought he to tell her of the incident of the night before; or might not that be simply putting fancies into her head? Young people were imaginative and whimsical, and given to thinking over things: perhaps it might be better if he held his peace.

“Nan,” said he, when they had agreed to stroll in to Henley together, “I will bring an action against that coach-builder,

if he doesn't send home the phaeton at once. I cannot have you continually walking in to Henley, every time you want to call at a shop or two."

"But I like the walking, Dodo!" she made answer, as she was leaving the room. "And I shall be ready in five or ten minutes."

"Don't hurry—don't hurry," said he, careful as ever of her. "There's no hurry at all. You'll find me dawdling along the road—you can overtake me whenever you like."

For he could not get these harassing questions answered. And yet they were nearly all being answered, so far as he was concerned, on this very highway, and that within a few minutes of his leaving the house. As he was walking along, his hands clasped behind his back, occasionally his eyes lighted on an animal, some considerable distance off, that at first he considered to be merely a large dog. He

paid little heed ; he was plunged in reverie ; but this was the only living creature in the solitary thoroughfare ; and naturally his glance wandered back to it. Then in a dim kind of fashion—gradually, not suddenly—it dawned upon him that there was something uncanny about this beast that was approaching ; something unusual and strange ; it surely was no dog, whatever else it might be ? He looked again, startled into a keener consciousness ; and now he perceived that this was certainly no dog ; this tawny-hued creature with the round bullet head, with white bristles at the mouth, cropped-looking ears, long body, and curved, down-sweeping tail that nearly touched the ground ; nor had it the springy gait of a dog—it came along with a stealthy, sinuous, slouching movement of its massive and supple limbs. The next instant he had guessed the truth : this was some animal escaped from a travelling menagerie—some creature of the puma kind—that was now

eying him furtively as it drew near. Well, he did not know what to do; rather, he wanted to do nothing, if the beast would prove equally obliging and pass on. He stood still, watching—ready to meet any spring as best he might—but sincerely hoping there would be nothing of the sort. Now at this point of the road the foot-path is bounded by a row of elms; and behind these again is a dilapidated fence; and as the puma, with its silent footfall, and its deep-grooved, feline eyes warily observing him, approached, it showed a disposition to sidle off between the trees and the fence. He let it, and welcome; it was none of his business to stop it; he was not armed even with a stick. He remained standing in the middle of the highway. The fawn-coloured, velvet-footed creature skulked in by the fence, pursuing its stealthy course; he was content to let it go.

And then something like fire seemed

to flash through his brain: he suddenly thought of Nan. Like a coward he had let the beast go by; Nan would be coming along; she would be terrified, would hesitate, and retreat, inviting attack; and what then? From that moment this man knew neither what he did nor what was happening to him. He was governed by the one determination, that so long as the breath of life remained within his body, he would dispute the way to Crowhurst with this animal that had just passed; there should be no danger for Nan, when she came out, trusting to his protection of her. He ran along the road; he could see the tawny creature making its way between the elms and the fence; as he approached it obliquely, it turned slightly to regard him; and therewith he threw himself upon it, with both hands gripped into its neck, trying to pin the round bullet head to the ground. He had no wish to hurt the brute, or he might have hammered it between the

eyes with his fist ; there was but the one thought in his mind : ‘ No, you cannot go that way. Any other way you are free to go, but not that way. So long as I can pinion you down, I will take care that Nan is safe.’

And now a fierce and appalling struggle had begun—a struggle that at the very outset had nearly ended ill for Nan’s father, for the loose fat folds of skin on the animal’s neck yielded somewhat, and with a powerful backward jerk it had nearly wrenched itself free. Nearly, but not quite: nay, Summers managed to better his grip, getting one hand well into the windpipe ; and this resolute grip he stuck to, though the convulsive contortions and writhings of the beast’s body were terrible to withstand. There was not a sound—neither a roar nor a groan ; but the long tail of the creature curved and lashed in fury ; the strong bristles from its gray muzzle stood out erect and stiff ; and

each round ball of a foot, that had formerly been as velvet, now showed a gaping semi-circle of angry claws, as it tore and wrenched and fought. How long could such a contest last?—this powerful brute was so sinuous and slippery!—the odour of its breath was so overwhelmingly fetid! He thought he heard a sound of wheels; but he could not reason, or even hope. He hung on to his viselike grip despite the deep-lacerating claws. Then there were voices near him—human voices; but he did not turn, nor even think; his fingers kept their merciless indentation in the straining and twisting neck; it was with a mighty grasp that Nan's bull-dog held on to his—or rather her—enemy. And then—then something went wrong; he seemed to choke and gasp with pain; and if he had any consciousness at all, it was of some vague desire to say, ‘Good-bye, Nan—good-bye—good-bye’—and after that he knew nothing.

“Are you better, sir?”

This was the first sound that reached his ears, after a vacant space of swoon: he opened his eyes—and instinctively put his hand up to his heart.

“Yes, yes,” he said, with difficulty. Then he anxiously glanced along the road. “I shall be all right in a minute. There’ll be some one here directly—she must not be told—she must not be frightened——”

“If you would get into the dog-cart, sir,” the man said, “I will drive you down to Henley, and you could see a surgeon—— I’m very sorry——”

“No, no!” said Summers, impatiently—though he seemed to gasp somehow in his breathing. He struggled to his feet, with friendly assistance. Out there, as he could see, in the highway was the proffered dog-cart; and near to the horse’s head stood two men, each of whom held a thong of the leash that secured the puma, while

one of them had a heavy dog-whip in his hand. "Why don't you take the beast away?" Nan's father continued, with another anxious glance along the road. "My daughter will be here directly—she must not understand anything of what has happened. Why don't you go away?"

"I don't like to leave you, sir," the man said. "You see we've got the puma safe enough—much obliged to you, sir—don't know what might ha' happened—for he's a nasty one when his temper's riz—"

"But why don't you go away?" Summers said, imploringly. "For Heaven's sake, man, go away—only go away! That's all I ask of you. Leave me to myself. I'm all right."

With evident reluctance the man retired a step or two; and Mr. Summers, after some feeble attempt at smoothing his clothes, that had got considerably dishevelled in the struggle, set out to walk

back to Crowhurst, slowly and carefully, and with a curiously preoccupied look on his downcast face, almost as if he were listening. But as soon as he saw Nan coming along, he pulled himself together ; he straightened himself up ; he endeavoured to appear quite unconcerned ; and his left arm, that was still running warm with blood, he hid as he best could.

“Are you going to scold me, Dodo ?” she called to him. “Have I kept you waiting too long ?”

“Oh, no,” he said, as she came up. “But—but I am going back to the house for a minute—I have forgotten my watch.”

At the same moment she noticed the strange grayness of his complexion, and also the disarray of his dress, which with him was a most unwonted thing.

“What is it, Dodo ? What has happened ?” she cried.

“Nothing, Nan, nothing——”

But now her eye caught sight of certain

dark spots on the ground; moved by a sudden wild suspicion and fear she passed quickly to his side, to the half-concealed arm; and then, when she saw the torn and rent coat sleeve, and the blood flowing freely over his hand, she uttered a piteous little cry—more of compassion, perhaps, than of absolute terror.

“I tell you it is nothing, Nan,” he said. “A mere scratch—it was the branch of a thorn.”

She knew better than that, but she was not going to bother him with questions. For she also had some little bit of nerve. Not one word did she utter as she walked by his side along to the gate; she merely listened to his grave assurances that there was nothing to be alarmed about; and if her lips were a trifle pale and resolved, she showed no other sign of emotion. They reached the house.

“Nan,” he said, “you might go and tell old John I want him for a second.”

“No,” she answered him.

“But he must help me off with my coat.”

“I can do that,” she said, calmly.

She went up with him to his room; she took off his coat and waistcoat; with a pair of scissors she cut away the crimsoned shirt sleeve—the sight of the streaming blood in no wise seeming to shock or deter her; and in an incredibly short time she had everything ready—basin, water, sponge, towels, and a handful of bandages brought from her ambulance chest.

“I wouldn’t hurry, Nan,” said he, gently. “I wouldn’t hurry at all. You see, I had a little bit of a spasm—a trifling thing; but perhaps it was the running of the blood made the heart work again and brought me back to my senses. I’m not much of a doctor; but there may be something in that; and in any case why should you trouble? This kind of thing is not for you at all. I wish you would tie a silk

handkerchief round my arm ; and I will lie down for a while ; and you can send old John into Henley for a doctor to come out ; and you can go into the garden and amuse yourself.”

“ Yes, I am likely to go and amuse myself in the garden while you are like this ! ” she answered him ; and therewithal she proceeded—not unskilfully either, for some smattering of ambulance instruction had been included in her curriculum at the vicarage—to bathe and stanch those ragged flesh wounds, and bind them with cool wet bandages. And then she fetched him his dressing-gown, and helped him to put it on ; and she improvised a sling out of her feather boa, and hung that round his neck, and placed his arm in it ; and then she got him to lie down on the couch by the window, hoping he would in time fall asleep—for he seemed somewhat faint through loss of blood—while the surgeon was being brought out from Henley. Her

father quite surrendered himself into her hands.

"I did not know they were such practical people at the vicarage," said he.

And it was not to old John the gardener, nor yet to the small groom, that Nan intrusted the duty of summoning out the doctor with all possible speed; she knew one who was fleeter of foot than either of them—and that was herself; and presently she was on the highway again, making for Henley at a fine pace, rendered possible to her by her light step and lissome figure. Yet she had not gone very far when she met a dog-cart, driven by a man who appeared to be in no great haste, for his horse was walking; and without a moment's hesitation she went up to this man.

"I beg your pardon, sir," she said, "but would you be so kind as to drive me in to Henley? I want to fetch a surgeon."

The man regarded her with some curiosity.

“ I don’t know, miss, but it may be as you belong to the gentleman that was hurt nigh by here, about half an hour ago——”

“ I am his daughter ! ” she exclaimed.

“ There, now ! ” he said. “ And the gentleman he would send me away ; but I wasn’t easy in my mind—no, I wasn’t easy in my mind ; and I thought I’d come back, and see if there wasn’t anybody about, that I might ask about him. And I hope, miss, the gentleman isn’t badly hurt——”

“ But will you drive me in to Henley at once, please—will you be so kind ? ” Nan interposed, urgently.

“ That I will,” said he, shifting the reins to his right hand, and giving her his left to help her up. And then he turned the horse, and sent him forward towards the town.

“ What was it that happened to my father ? ” she demanded.

“ Why, did he not tell you about the puma ? ” the man said, in surprise.

“ He told me nothing. I suppose he thought I might be frightened. But I am not so easily frightened. Tell me what happened.”

Thereupon, as far as he knew it, he gave her a complete narrative—of the escape of the puma ; of their pursuit ; of the terrible struggle that must have taken place in the pathway ; and of their arrival just in time to pinion the beast, at the moment that her father appeared to be attacked by some fit. To Nan the whole story was as clear as daylight. It was to save her from possible harm that her father had engaged in this deadly wrestle ; he knew she was coming along the road ; single-handed he had striven with and held his own against that dangerous brute. She understood : she could see it all. The man beside her went on to tell her of the various pumas of which he had had experience, some of them docile, others of them savage, but all of them of extraordinary suppleness and agility ; and

he had no words to express his admiration of the splendid strength and courage of the gentleman who had waged that grim fight. But it was not of her father's great physical powers that Nan was thinking ; rather it was of a certain weakness of the heart which, as he had been warned, might at any moment develop alarming symptoms. Yet, as this last incident once more demonstrated, he seemed to have no thought of himself, no regard for himself, wherever she was concerned. She heard no more about pumas, tame or savage. She was stealthily crying.

The doctor returned with Nan to Crowhurst ; Mr. Summers—much against his will, for he wished to make light of this affair—was transformed into an invalid ; Nan, as self-appointed nurse, received ample and minute instructions ; and these she proceeded to carry out with an assiduous, and affectionate, and scrupulous diligence. Nevertheless she was not satisfied.

"Dodo," she said on the following day, "will you let me telegraph to Mr. Erridge to come and see you?"

"But why, Nan—but why?" he asked.

"It would cheer you up a bit, and keep you amused," she said. "I'm afraid I only tire you. Mr. Erridge knows about so many things that interest you, and he can go on talking——"

"I don't want talking, Nan," he answered her. "I would rather play a game of draughts with you than talk an evening long with Dick Erridge. But what would content me best of all would be for you to go oftener out into the garden, or along the road for a walk; you're not used to be constantly in-doors. I can get on well enough with a book or a newspaper——"

"And I know what would happen," she said, promptly. "You would put the newspaper down. You would lie and think. And it's about me you would be thinking;

and you would grow anxious and disturbed —the very thing the doctor said must be avoided——”

“ Well, indeed I have been thinking about you, Nan,” he said, slowly. “ Especially since yesterday. Supposing, yesterday, I had not come to my senses again——”

“ Dodo, I will not have you talk like that! ” she protested, as she had protested before.

“ But I must talk like that,” he said, gravely and gently. “ I must talk like that. Well, in such a case how would you be situated? You are too young to live in this house alone. And even if Miss Deyncourt came to live with you, you would be still quite uncertain as to the future. Can you wonder if that makes me anxious? Of course I don’t particularly wish to see you married—not now—not at this moment; but I should like to know, especially after what happened yesterday,

that there was some understanding that your future was all safe and secure. And that, Nan," he added, regarding her, "is why I should be glad to see Dick Erridge, if you care to telegraph to him."

Her face flushed crimson; and she was silent. He also remained silent.

"We have come to *King Henry V.*," she said, presently. "You remember, Dodo, the last play left off at the point where poor old Falstaff is sent into disgrace. Shall I go on?"

"But about Dick Erridge?" he said.

There was a moment of hesitation.

"May I send the telegram in your name?" she asked.

"Certainly."

"Then I will write out the message."

"And there's another thing I have been thinking over, Nan" he continued. "I wanted to speak to you about Mr. Hume."

And again she was silent; but the

fingers touching the open page before her trembled a little.

“ You remember, when you left the vicarage to come here, I told you you would have to make up your own little set of friends and acquaintances, just as there might be the opportunity ; of course there are not many chances in such an out-of-the-world place as this. But there’s Dick Erridge, now—he’s all right—his people would be friendly enough—Dick’s all right. As for Mr. Hume, I’m afraid we have made a mistake, Nan, and that’s the fact. I gathered as much on the day we drove from Wantage ; he told us a good deal about himself and his family that day ; and I have been thinking over it. Nan, it won’t do. His people are not our people. They have a different place in the world altogether. And it might in time come to be an introduction to his relatives ; and I don’t want to have you subjected to any snub. I am too proud for that. I don’t

complain of people having prejudices ; it is only natural ; but I would rather turn to the people who have no such prejudices—people like Dick Erridge and his family, people like that. I don't say anything against Mr. Hume himself ; not at all ; he seems to me modest, and gentlemanly, and well-meaning ; but young men make mistakes ; and I think he made a mistake in becoming acquainted with us ; and that we have made a mistake too in continuing the acquaintance ; and that there is only the one way out—to let it end, now. Do you quite understand me, Nan ? Is it quite clear to you ? ”

“ Yes, Dodo,” she said, in a low voice.

It was quite clear to her. And perhaps that was the reason why, when Sidney Hume called that afternoon and was shown into the drawing-room, the maid-servant returned with the message that Mr. Summers had met with an accident, and that Miss Summers was in constant attendance

on him : they begged the visitor to excuse them. And again, when he called the next morning, anxious to offer any possible help, there was the same message, with the assurance that Mr. Summers was doing very well. And yet again, when he went out in the afternoon, moved by some desperate desire to see her if but for a moment—to hear her voice—to convince himself that those dear eyes were not overtroubled by this misfortune—he was once more refused. He went away thinking she might have vouchsafed him a single word, a single glance.

And when he returned to Henley there was a letter from his mother, filled with half-amused, half-angry reproaches. Was he never to have done with those wandering actors ?—had he lost himself in India or Asia Minor two thousand years ago ? At all events, she said, Lady Helen and she were coming down for the Henley week. It would be too absurd for each of

them to have a river-side house at Henley and be absent from the regatta. And if the Monks-Hattons did not care to entertain, ‘dearest Helen’ could at least give her friends tea on the lawn. Plenty of friends, Mrs. Hume added, she would have on that busy occasion, even if a certain young man had not returned from his exploration of the ghostly Hellenistic world; but perhaps by that time he would have become alive to the fact that two lone women, when they proposed to pay a few visits among the house-boats, might prefer to be taken about by one whom they knew rather than throw themselves on the mercy of a waterman. She wound up by hinting that, after the Henley week, Lady Helen might not care to return to town; in which case she, the writer, would of course resume occupation of Lilac Lodge.

So both of them were coming down, and that almost directly? But something had happened since he had seen them last—

something sufficiently momentous : he had not been, as they seemed to imagine, loitering all his time away in the phantom company of those Greek strolling players.

CHAPTER IV.

“LET THE SWEET HEAVENS ENDURE.”

YES ; Henley was waking up out of its old-world drowsiness. On the river the course for the regatta was being staked out with white poles ; under the tall poplars workmen were hammering at a stand ; small red flags caught the eye here and there amongst the green ; now and again a practising eight would come swinging along, their blue-tipped oars hitting the surface into silver, their coach, riding along the towpath, bawling at them his criticisms and commands. Sometimes there would be as many as six, perchance even seven, spectators on the bridge, their elbows at right angles on the parapet ; the telegraph-boy would be seen making

for the Angel, or the Royal, or the Red Lion, with a brown envelope in his hand ; the two or three cab-drivers at the station, when a train came in, aroused themselves from their dark and mysterious reverie, and tried to look as if they half expected a fare. Then all around the landscape was at its brightest and freshest—the densely foliaged heights, the shimmering stream, the wide meadows showing their luminous tints in our cool English sunshine ; while the gardens were now a blaze of roses, and scarlet geraniums, and luxuriant honeysuckle. It seemed as though Henley would be worth a casual glance, when London came down.

But neither with these busy preparations nor with the basking landscape was Sidney in any manner concerned ; his thoughts were away inland among the whispering beechwoods. Distracting thoughts they were—conjectures—vacillations : he did not know what to make of the repeated refusals he had encountered on his visits to Crow-

hurst; he began to ask himself whether they meant that the door there was shut on him for ever. Then one morning, when these conflicting anxieties and hesitations had given way to an overpowering determination that he must, at whatever cost, have speech of Nan herself—on this particular morning he was startled to perceive Dick Erridge driving across Henley bridge. There could not be the slightest doubt whither the gaily dressed young man was bound; he only stopped at the Red Lion to have a chat and ‘a drink’; then he drove on again. And in spite of his calmer reason, some strangely disquieting fancies began to occupy Sidney’s mind. Would Dick Erridge be granted admission where he had been denied? Well, why not? He was an old friend—of Mr. Summers’s, at least. Would Nan come down to the drawing-room to see him, instead of sending him a message? And yet again, why not? She was bound to be civil to him, as an old

acquaintance of her father's; she might even have to ask him to stay to lunch, while the horses were being rested; and these two might be compelled, in the existing circumstances, to have luncheon by themselves, in the cool small dining-room, with the shaded open windows, and the vivid glimpses of flowers. That was an abhorrent suggestion; and his brows grew dark over it. Not that he feared in Dick Erridge a possibly successful rival; he could not insult Nan by any such supposition; Nan, with her clear, shrewd eyes, her swift perceptions, and sunny laughter, was quite capable of forming her own estimate of the music-hallish youth. But he would not have him even go near her; it was a degradation; that these two should sit at table together by themselves was a monstrous thing; and no doubt he would do his best to entertain her with his 'shallow wit.' This was not at all jealous anger—Sidney assured himself—that filled his heart

and seemed to blacken out the very sunlight from the day around him ; but, if not, it was a remarkably good imitation of it ; and in the end—after varying moods of indecision, of vague apprehension, and indignant self-reproach—he got his hat and started off to find out definitely for himself whether Dick Erridge had been received at Crowhurst.

There was little difficulty about that. Erridge was almost certain to return by the Fair Mile ; for although there is the other highway terminating in Gravel Hill, it is exceedingly steep as it descends into the town, and Dick was not likely to run the risk of having his leader turn round in the middle of the road and ask him what he meant. So Sidney walked away out by the noble avenue of elms, that were now swaying and rustling in the summer breeze with a sound as of waves on some distant shore ; and he kept looking along the broad lilac-hued highway between the strips of

green common that at any moment might become a more living picture by the appearance of tandem horses, and a tall dog-cart, and a smartly dressed young man. But the longer he walked the more he became assured that Dick had not driven out to Crowhurst merely to make inquiries and leave a card ; other vehicles came along the Fair Mile, but not the tall dog-cart ; and by the time he struck off at the Traveller's Rest, to make his way into the higher country, he knew that the visitor had been received and was now doubtless being entertained.

And yet he wandered on, though the fresh-scented morning afforded him no kind of interest or delight. The soft country sounds—the far-off bleating of sheep, the flute-note of the cuckoo among the woods, the trilling of the larks unseen in the silver skies, the hollow footfalls of a horse trotting along some dusty highway—were but as a mockery of the feverish turmoil within his

breast. He looked at the straggling hedges, with their stars of rose-pink, and cream-white, and blue; and it seemed as if she had forsaken them and gone away. And what immeasurable and hopeless distance —what impassable silent gulf—was this that appeared to separate him from her?—though every step was taking him, inadvertently or not, so much the nearer to the secluded house beyond the murmuring beeches.

Of course, if he had thought of the matter at all, he might have considered himself quite safe in adventuring into this neighbourhood; for both Nan and her father would be occupied with their newly arrived guest. He ran no risk; this empty world was all his own; he could wander whither he pleased. And so it was, in aimlessly ascending these lonely heights, when he caught a glimpse of a girl's figure disappearing into a lane leading at right angles from the highway he was following, he

asked himself in amazement if that could possibly be Nan. How could it be Nan? The figure that had thus suddenly vanished was alone, and going in the opposite direction from Crowhurst; whereas surely Nan would be busy in-doors? Nevertheless, he hastened his steps, marvelling if some miracle had befallen. For one thing, he knew that the unfrequented path along the top of the ridge, between the tall hedges, was a favourite resort of Nan's; it was high up above the rest of the landscape; it commanded spacious views; and it was lonely. But if by some wild possibility this could be she, what had become of Dick Erridge and her father?—and on what errand could she be bent?

A minute or two brought him to the parting of the ways; and here no one was visible, through the twisting of this secluded thoroughfare; but he had no sooner hastened along to the first turning than he saw that this was indeed no other than Nan—some

distance ahead of him—and walking slowly. He could have overtaken her almost at once; but he hung back somehow. Perhaps there was something of profanation in his intruding upon her solitude; perhaps the issues at stake were to him so tremendous that he did not care to imperil them by any rashness. She was not escaping from him. Instead of her usual free and light and eager step, her pace was slow and dilatory; her head was slightly bent down, as if she was thinking over something; she paid little heed to what was around her. Again and again he was on the point of going rapidly forward; and then he feared he might alarm her; would it not be simpler and more reassuring to her if he met her when she turned to come back? For it was clear she was not bent on any definite errand.

Then by-and-by she turned aside from the middle of the highway and went up to a gate that bridged across a gap in the

hedge. This gate opened into a wide field of wheat—the slowly moving glaucous-green showing here and there a sprinkling of scarlet poppies ; and beyond that again was a valley ; and beyond the valley a series of partly wooded heights rising and receding into the far horizon, with one solitary pale red mansion set among the soft green of the trees. And perhaps it was merely to look in absent mood across this stretch of country that she stood at the gate, her hands idly placed on the top bar ; yet even now he would not interrupt ; it would startle her less if she met him on her return.

But what presently happened was nearly scattering all this anxious consideration of his to the winds. Of a sudden she crossed her hands that were on the top bar of the gate ; she bent down her head over them, so that her face was hidden ; while the slim, girlish figure seemed to be shaken by a violent fit of weeping. What could this mystery mean ? Nan the light-hearted—

the smiling-eyed—who had always appeared to him the very embodiment of all the gay and happy and radiant things of summer : how should she be overtaken by such a storm of grief? This revelation terrified him ; he did not go forward to her, as had been his first quick impulse ; nay, he would almost sooner have retreated, and left her with her secret. But that break-down on the part of the girl was only momentary. She raised her head ; dried her eyes ; and set out on her walk again—this time with a more decided step. She went on until she came to another parting of the roads ; and then, as if this was the distance she had undertaken to complete, she turned, and set out for home again. Sidney was awaiting her, between the tall hedges.

As she drew near, having observed him, she was obviously constrained and embarrassed ; her eyes were downcast ; perhaps she would rather have gone by without a word ? But she answered his inquiries

with regard to her father: Mr. Summers was getting on very well, though he was not allowed to move about much. Then, possibly to make excuse for her having left her patient, she explained that a friend had just come to spend the day at Crowhurst; and that her father had at once seized this opportunity to send her for a walk. And then she held out her hand timidly, and said,

“Good-bye!”

But he refused to see the furtively extended hand.

“Oh, no, we cannot part like that,” said he, pleadingly, “because—because I have something to say to you—I must speak—there is something I must tell you——”

She trembled a little; her eyes were still averted; yet she did not seek to interrupt him, or to move away.

“Do you remember the first time I saw you?” he went on. “The very first time—at the gate of St. Mary’s Church——”

All the white roses of her face grew pink ; but she did not answer.

“ Do you remember ? ” he said. “ The children had been strewing flowers—you turned—and I saw you then for the first time. I met your eyes for a moment—when you hardly expected any one. Do you remember ? ”

“ Yes, I remember,” she said, in a low voice.

“ Well, ever since that moment I have loved you. Nan—I have loved you—night and day thinking of you ; and sometimes it seemed impossible to me that your heart could ever turn to me—it seemed far too much to hope for ; and then again I tried to read things in your look—just a guess it was, now and again—and I did not despair so much.”

And now he had hold of both her hands ; and she did not withdraw them ; some indefinable glamour of his presence seemed to be round her like a cloud, compelling her to remain.

"Nan, have you no word for me?" he said. "I offer you the whole love of my life: have you no word for me?"

The trembling fingers that he held so tight made no resistance; nay, she raised her face to his—and never had he so thrilled to the fascination of that fresh young loveliness; while all the answer he demanded was in her half-joyful, half-tearful eyes. He stooped his head: their lips met. A first kiss!—and all the world appeared to fall away from around them; and they were by themselves in a new universe; alone in some seventh heaven of exaltation—some hitherto undiscovered sphere that seemed all palpitating with wonder, and entrancement, and an aching over-joy of transport and commingling self-surrender.

"But you have not told me yet, Nan," said he, with one arm drawing her close to him, while with the other hand he pushed back the loose waifs and curls of golden-brown hair that the wind had blown about her ears.

“I am with you, Sidney—I am here with you,” she said—as though that were surely sufficient. And she called him ‘Sidney’ as if by some happy and easy and natural instinct: perhaps it was as ‘Sidney’ that she had been thinking of him, in her mute maiden reveries.

“And do you know what you have done, Nan?” he said. “Do you know that you have given me all this wonderful treasure that I am holding—all these beautiful things become mine—your beautiful forehead, and all this beautiful hair, and the dear eyes—well, I think they told me something before you would. For you haven’t told me even yet, Nan—you haven’t said anything.”

“But I am with you, · Sidney: what more?” she made answer, as if she shrank from putting into definite words the confession his ears hungered to hear. “And only a little while ago, a few minutes ago, I was thinking I should never see you again.”

"Was that when you were at the gate, Nan?" he asked, gently.

She looked up.

"Yes, I saw you," he continued. "I saw you were unhappy, and I did not like to intrude on you. I waited. I waited—but I did not dream that all this strange thing was so near—this great happiness to become mine—that is—that is, if you love me, Nan."

Another challenge it was: so impatient, and eager, and anxious he was for her shy avowal. She refused no longer.

"I love you, Sidney," she said, in a voice almost inaudible, even here amid the slumbering silence of the woods and the fields.

He kissed her forehead and her eyes; he kissed her hands; he did not know how to show his pride and his gratitude. Of what avail was speech, in shadowing forth ineffable things? To live was enough, with every succeeding moment filled to overflow-

ing with the wild rapture of possession—the beautiful head, ‘ sunning over with curls,’ clasped close to his bosom—her heart-throbs answering his own.

And then she withdrew herself from his embrace—he would not have her go—she must go—he besought her to stay—her eyes told him how willingly she would have remained.

And then again she looked around, at those luxuriant hedges where the bees were drowsily humming and the butterflies fluttering and alighting and fluttering on again, from pink to blue, from blue to crimson, from crimson to golden yellow.

“I should like to give you a white wild rose, Sidney,” she said, “if we could find one.”

“Will you, Nan?” said he—as if she had promised him all the jewelled splendours of the East.

They searched about—led astray frequently by the pale bells of the bindweed

—but they could find no wild-rose bush up on these heights.

“Never mind,” said she. “I know where to find them, in the afternoon, when Mr. Erridge has gone; and I will get a messenger and send you one.”

“But may I not come up for it, Nan, in the evening?” said he. “You know, you cannot turn me away from Crowhurst any more. I claim you now. You belong to me.”

“Oh, no, indeed, Sidney, no, indeed,” she said, earnestly. “You must not think that. I belong to my father. Poor Dodo, he thinks a great deal too much of me, and I know I am useless enough to him, but still I must be with him, until he tells me to go. As for you, Sidney, I have given you my love—is not that enough?”

“Yes, indeed it is, Nan,” he answered her. “And I am not going to be so ungrateful as to ask for anything more—for the present, at least. Yes, yes; you must remain with your father—that is quite

right—but you know you belong to me all the same, Nan—you are altogether mine—from every wisp and curl of that beautiful hair to the very tip of the toe of your boot. And what is more,” he continued, as they set out for Crowhurst—hand in hand, like boy and girl lovers—“when you reach home now, I am going in with you, to explain everything to your father——”

“ Sidney ! ” she protested. “ With Mr. Erridge in the house ! ”

“ Oh, as for Dick Erridge,” said he, with a quite reckless generosity, “ don’t you make any mistake, Nan. He is a capital fellow—an excellent fellow; there’s a great deal of well-intentioned honest human nature about him. I don’t think anybody would be better pleased than he would if we told him our secret. And why should it be a secret at all ? I should like all the world to know it ! ”

“ But I would rather not, Sidney,” she said, with shy lowering of the eyes.

And when they reached the white gate he was still for going boldly in and telling everybody—but especially Mr. Summers—of the great event that had happened; but she persuaded him to refrain; she herself would tell her father, when there was no visitor in the house, and the ways were clear. Well, he was content; he was ready to obey her in everything; his heart was far too full of joy and gratitude to enable him to question the propriety of anything she might suggest or demand. So he bade her farewell; and he would have kissed her again, but she apprehensively drew back—for this highway was more open than the secret and sacred path between the tall hedges; and presently, with his long swinging stride, he was making his way through the beechwoods, not yet capable of realising all the splendour of good fortune and happiness that had come into his life, but narrowing himself down to the white wild rose that

he would look for and wait for, minute by minute, half-hour by half-hour, all through the afternoon.

Yet the afternoon had drawn on towards evening ere tidings arrived from Crowhurst; and these were brought, not by any messenger bearing a mystic love-token, but by Dick Erridge driving his tandem pair. The two young men ran across each other in Hart Street, by the church; and Dick at once pulled up.

“This time, now,” said he, “are you free to dine with me—Red Lion—say the word, and I’ll hand the trap over to my man—and I’ll get home by rail, or I don’t mind if I stay the night. You’ve never given me the chance before——”

Well, Sidney gave him the chance now, and right gladly: why, here was the only creature in the whole universe who could talk to him about the Summerses, who could tell him something about Nan, who had but a little while ago been in the

same room with her, observant of her looks and ways and dress. And overjoyed was Dick, too, when he discovered he was at last to have an opportunity of showing that he knew what was what. He sent away the dog-cart in charge of his groom ; he walked into the hotel, and seemed to take possession of the whole place ; he secured a private sitting-room overlooking the river ; the head waiter received his instructions, minute, elaborate, and sagacious ; and then, as Dick declared, there was nothing for it but a filet d'anchois, a glass of sherry and bitters, and a stroll down to the bridge—these as an appetiser—while the banquet was being prepared. Moreover, when they did at length sit down to this meal, which was quite unnecessarily sumptuous for a warm summer evening, Dick was in good case : the host is happily situated who can talk to his guest about the one thing, out of all the things in the world, concerning which the guest most wishes to hear.

"And he wanted to hide it from her!" Dick continued, referring to the puma affair, about which he was exultingly enthusiastic. "Fancy doing a swell thing, a magnificent thing like that for any one, and then trying to hide it! But Miss Nan found out—trust her, when once she was on the scent!—she got the whole story from the menagerie fellow; and lucky it was for him, by-the-way, that no greater mischief was done. Gad, I should like to ha' seen that set-to! A puma is a kind of leopard, isn't it?—a powerful beast, no doubt; but Jim Summers's shoulders weren't given to him for nothing——"

"But why Jim?" broke in Sidney, with angry impatience. "What has the poor man done that he must be called Jim?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Dick, most humbly. "Mr. Summers, of course. Very sorry; a slip o' the tongue, that's all. And as I was saying, I'd like to have seen him pin down that beast—that

was a grip!—do you think there's another man in England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales could have done that? But then, you see, he was driven mad by fearing there might harm come to the girl; and that's enough for Jim—for Mr. Summers: raise a finger against her—and then, by all the powers, ware hawk! ”

He helped himself to the claret liberally.

“ And I should like well to ha' seen that bit of a scrimmage in the Fair Mile,” he went on, in the same ecstatic vein. “ What a piece of luck your happening to be there! I tell you, it would just have pleased me—it would have pleased me down to the ground—to see the first navvy get that oner — by gad, he must have thought he had struck against a volcano, or a runaway mountain, or something. Brought him up rather sharp, didn't it? ” he proceeded, with a chuckle of intensest satisfaction. “ Like a bluebottle buzzing along—happy as a king—laughing at its

own jokes—and all of a sudden it bangs its noddle against a window-pane : that's what they call bringing up sharp, don't you know ! I wonder how the navvy liked it ? I could ha' warned the beggar. I'd have said to him, ‘ Now don't you put a hand on Ji—on Mr. Summers's daughter ; you'd better not do that ; it would be far wiser for you to go away, to go away altogether, and sit quietly in the shade, and make pretty rosy-posies out of daisies and buttercups. That will be a great deal wholesomer for you than trying to put a hand on Miss Anne Summers.’ And he went down with a crack, did he ? Lie long ? ”

“ I did not wait to see, to tell you the truth,” Sidney responded. “ I dare say the other fellows lugged him along to the Traveller’s Rest, and patched him together with gin.”

“ Couldn’t do that,” said Dick, with suspicious promptitude. “ The Traveller’s

Rest has only a beer license. They must have taken him on to the Red Cross."

"It seemed to me a very scientific bit of business," Sidney observed. "I never saw two men so beautifully bowled over right and left."

"Oh, he's handy with his fists," Dick Erridge said, evasively. And then he added: "By-the-way, have you seen how Tim Mulligan is vapouring all round the shop, over there in San Francisco, with his challenge for ten thousand dollars a side? But what George Slater says is quite right. Let him come over here if he wants the match; Parkes will find the money easy enough; and England should be the headquarters; I say England should be the headquarters—the country of Gentleman Jackson, and Shaw the Life Guardsman, and Bendigo, and Ben Caunt, and Tom Sayers. Let him come over here. We'll make up a purse to any extent he likes——"

"Did you notice what a fine show of roses they have at Crowhurst now?" said Sidney, to whom San Francisco and pugilism were topics of too remote an interest. And therewith the young man, amid his eager and assiduous duties as host, brought the conversation back to this immediate neighbourhood, and to Miss Anne's garden, and to her appearance, her pursuits, her affection for her father, and so on, and so on; and little did he know how sweet and grateful was the sauce he was adding to those dishes which he so earnestly recommended.

And meanwhile had the messenger—the grave old Scotch gardener? or the smart little page-boy? or a maid-servant despatched on excuse of some other errand — brought down a certain inestimable treasure from the far woodland heights? Sidney grew anxious and preoccupied—protested against their lingering over the wine — proposed a cigarette out-of-doors

instead. And to this Dick Erridge at once assented ; he was ready for anything ; he was happy ; he had acquitted himself well ; he knew that his little dinner had been a success.

When they went outside they found that the twilight had not yet gone from the world ; the lads of the village were still seated on the parapet of the bridge, their legs dangling over the water, while they criticised the performances of the white-costumed eights that shot ghostlike through the gathering dusk. As Sidney and his companion walked idly along the river-side they came at length to Lilac Lodge ; and here Sidney asked to be excused for a moment. He passed through the garden ; he opened the door. On the hall table there lay a small oblong parcel—a pasteboard box apparently, neatly tied up in white paper—and addressed to himself. He knew what this contained ; but he would not open it now ; he would choose

a more cryptic moment, when the night had come, and he was alone. But it was with a proud heart that he returned to this chance acquaintance of his; and sometimes, while he was dutifully listening to Dick's observations on mankind and their various sports and occupations, his thoughts would fly away out to the solitude of the beech-woods, and inwardly he was saying : ' Yes, sweetheart, I have your message—as pure, and sweet, and beautiful as yourself. And are you still wandering about in the garden, and thinking ; or has the night driven you in-doors ? '

Here by the river silence had not yet fallen, though the yellow gas lamps were now visible through the trees. Still there came a dull clank of oars from out of the gray shadows along the stream ; and there was a crunching of footfalls on the sandy road ; and remote voices, becoming indistinct. And still Dick Erridge chatted gaily on ; he was pleased with himself

and all the universe ; he had re-established himself ; he had shown he was not the 'bounder' he looked on the occasion of his calling at Lilac Lodge, dressed up in the garments of some friendly waiter.

CHAPTER V.

UNTIL TO-MORROW.

THE long invalid-chair of wicker-work, forming a kind of couch, was out here in the garden. Nan was seated by the side of it, on a low stool, and, with head bent down and in half-murmured tones, she was making confession to her father of all that had occurred that morning between Sidney Hume and herself. She did not once look up. She knew nothing of what was passing in this man's face ; she saw nothing of the dreams and the renunciation that were in his patient, sad eyes ; she did not even notice that his clenched right hand, resting on the arm of the chair, trembled somewhat. In profoundest silence he listened to her,

to the last word ; and even then he did not immediately answer her.

“Are you angry, Dodo ?” she asked, in the same low voice.

He roused himself instantly. “Angry, Nan ?” he said, with the greatest cheerfulness. “Angry ? This would be a pretty time for anger, when you come to tell me that you have got a sweetheart !—and that one just about the handsomest and best-dispositioned young fellow you could have found in the whole country. A splendid fellow—straightforward—honest—no showing off—and good-natured if good-nature was ever declared in any one’s manner. Hardly a time for anger, is it ? Rather a time for congratulations, I should say. And—and when are we to have the wedding, Nan ?”

She started in surprise. “The wedding, Dodo ?” she exclaimed. “There was no talk of any wedding. A wedding that would take me away from you ?”

“ Well ? ” said he, with bland encouragement. “ Well ; we must look forward to that, you know. It’s the way of the world —I’ve told you again and again. Young people must live their lives. Old people can’t be expected to live their own lives and to claim the young people’s lives as well ; that would hardly be fair, would it ? ”

“ But you don’t understand, Dodo,” she said, almost piteously. “ All that I have been telling you happened quite unforeseen —no one dreamed of it beforehand. The fact was I—I thought I was never to see him again—and I was very miserable, Dodo, and that is the truth—and then meeting him in this way—— ”

“ And that just shows you how I mismanage things for you, Nan,” said he. “ Here I send you out by yourself—when you were in great trouble—and I did not even know you were in trouble—— ”

“ I did not intend to tell you,” she murmured.

“But doesn’t that prove that you want some one nearer your own age to comprehend you and sympathise with you?” said he, with great gentleness. “Isn’t that clear enough? You see I haven’t been able to manage very well for you, Nan, with all my scheming—if you have to go away for a solitary walk—very wretched and miserable—thinking about what is troubling you—and not able to tell any one. And perhaps you were crying too?” he added, watching her in a timid and furtive way.

She hung her head.

“You see there’s where it is, Nan,” he went on. “I’m so stupid. You want some one nearer your own age.”

“I shall never have any one be as kind to me as you have been!” she said, passionately. “Never—never—never! But what I want you to understand, Dodo, is this: all I have been telling you that happened this morning came about by

accident ; it could not have been foreseen or avoided. But marriage is quite different. Marriage is something that can be put aside, if one wishes. And I am not going to leave you, Dodo, so long as you care to have me with you : will you remember ? ”

“ Very well, very well,” said he, and he put his hand on the soft, golden-brown hair. “ I don’t mean to drive you out of the house just yet. The time will come soon enough—all right, and natural, and as it should be. And there’s another thing, Nan. I mentioned to you one or two reasons why I thought our acquaintance-ship with Mr. Hume should be dropped. But then, you see, that was assuming there was nothing else than acquaintanceship betwixt you and him ; and now that it is all changed, now that he is your sweetheart, Nan, and will some day be your husband, well, you must entirely forget what I said about him and his family. I was exaggerating, I dare say—making mountains out of

molehills. People are reasonable, after all. And he will see that you are not put into any false position—trust him for that—he has a shrewd head on young shoulders. And he'll be so proud of you, Nan, that he won't let any one treat you but with respect. He has got some independence—some firmness—oh, yes, yes : he will see that his wife has not to run the gauntlet of any prejudice—— ”

“ But I am not his wife as yet, Dodo,” she said, with flushed forehead. “ I am only your daughter.”

“ And a very good daughter, too,” said he, blithely, though his eyes looked tired. “ Now give me your arm until I get on my legs. Dinner must be about ready.” Then, as they went together towards the house, he said : “ Why, don’t you know that you always put an extra value on anything that is yours when you see some one else value it as well ? And I am quite proud that my Nan should be appreciated

—yes, indeed ; something added on. You're a person of importance now, Nan—you with your young lover, handsome and clever and bold. And poor Dick Erridge—what is to become of him ? ”

“ Ah, that was never possible, Dodo,” she said, as they entered the house, “ though once or twice I thought of it, with a fancy that it might please you.”

Next morning again he was clearly nervous and troubled, though he endeavoured to preserve a gay demeanour. “ Do you expect a visitor to-day, Nan ? ” he said, at breakfast, regarding her with affectionate scrutiny. “ Surely your hair is a little trimmer than usual—not quite so wild and rebellious. And what hour are you looking forward to—five o'clock, for custom's sake, or four, if you allow for a little impatience, or perhaps even mid-day ? Or what do you say—what do you say, Nan, to twelve ? ”

“ He would have come in to see you

yesterday, Dodo," she said, with downcast lashes, "only that Mr. Erridge was here."

"Oh, I don't approve of formal interviews," said he, cheerfully—"not in the least. What is the use of them? The thing is done. You and he have settled it between you—all quite right and satisfactory; you and he are the important people. Why should I be expected to interfere or cause embarrassment? No, no; I will take care there sha'n't be any embarrassment for anybody."

Nevertheless, between eleven and twelve, as he was seated in the dining-room watching Nan put nasturtiums and sweetbrier into the flower-tubes on the table, a foot-fall outside summoned that apprehensive look back into his face again. "Nan," said he, quietly, "will you go out into the garden for a minute or two?"

She left, and the young man entered; but Mr. Summers at once cut short his

explanations and apologies for having ‘stole Bonny Glenlyon away.’

“It might have been wiser if you had looked elsewhere for a wife,” said he, gravely; “but then, as you say, sometimes these things happen without set intention; and in any case, since you two have pledged yourselves to each other, then that is done; and I ought to be glad of it, for it makes Nan’s future secure if anything should happen to me. I think you will be kind to her; and if you are, one thing is certain, she will not be ungrateful.”

“But why should you talk of Nan being left in that way?” Sidney protested. “Why should you make such gloomy forecasts?”

“I like to think that everything is prepared and made safe and secure where Nan is concerned,” he went on. “And, as I tell you, you won’t find her ungrateful for kindness. She’s a brave lass; she’s not

one of the whimperers. She is naturally light-hearted, and the best and happiest companion a man ever had. Well, why should I preach to you about Nan? You'd better go and talk to her yourself. You'll find her in the garden."

And Sidney would at once and gladly have accepted this invitation, only that, having eyes as well as another, he could not but perceive that on the table was a tray with a lot of cut nasturtiums and sprays of sweetbrier, while several of the flower-tubes were empty.

"But I am afraid I may be interrupting her," he said, with some hesitation. "It was really you that I was impatient to see at this unusual hour."

"Oh no, you won't interrupt her," her father said. "And the longer you keep her out in the open air and the sunlight the better. That is the proper place for Nan and for the roses in her cheeks. She's far too much given to hanging and

dawdling about me, when all I want is to sit still and give this slung arm of mine perfect rest. Now that's not the kind of a thing for a young girl at all. She should have plenty of active exercise—driving about, walking about, running, climbing, with fun and merriment. You go and make her ramble about the garden, and cheer her up. Tell her she is not wanted in-doors at all. Why should she bother about these rags of flowers? What is the use of paying wages to maidservants if they can't get the rooms ready?"

He spoke quite angrily; he took up the newspaper, so that his visitor might know he was dismissed; then, when the younger man had left the room, he resumed his seat. But he did not keep his attention fixed on the newspaper for long. Presently it dropped by his side. His eyes were staring blankly before him, with visions and recollections in them. Or perhaps he was vaguely listening, here in the cool shadow

of the room, near the open window? Yet what could he gather of the wide world without, save the chirping of birds, the stirring of the honeysuckle, the hum of bees, that made the universal silence seem remote? The lovers were away by themselves now, eager and busy and joyful with their own affairs; and he was alone. By-and-by there was a soft sound of footsteps on the path outside. He snatched up the newspaper and assumed an air of pre-occupied interest; it was the sporting intelligence he was apparently studying—how Michigan had been entered for the Royal Handicap at Leicester, and John Gilpin for the Cesarewitch and the Cambridgeshire. And then those footfalls faded away again; the paper dropped from his hand; and his eyes were once more thoughtful and sad—but not quite so sombre as they had been. For, even as the lovers passed, he had caught some tone or two of Nan's voice; and surely there was a fine and

happy cheerfulness there. He rang the bell, and with a kind of humility asked the maid-servant if she did not think she could finish putting the flowers in the glasses—so that Miss Anne should not be hurried when she came in from the garden.

And meanwhile what amazing discoveries those young people were making, as they strayed about in that wonderland of sweet scents, and glowing colours, and basking sunlight! Two lifetimes to be conned over: and in the give and take of personal experience and opinion each kept disclosing to the other a succession of marvels, of absorbing interest even in the smallest particulars. Of what did they not talk, in these swift-flying moments—of pansies, and poppies, and Wordsworth's daffodils, of Herrick, and Lovelace, and Suckling, of 'Kubla Khan,' and 'St. Agnes' Eve,' of Cumnor Hall over there in Berkshire and the hapless Amy Robsart, of Lorenzo and Jessica, and the magic Italian night—

anything, everything—it mattered little—so long as all the wonder of all the world shone in the rose-tints of her cheek and all heaven seemed to open to him in the blue deeps of her eyes. Perhaps, like most young men of the day, he was but indifferently acquainted with Burns; but his mother could have put him on the right track :

‘ I gaed a waefu’ gate yestreen,
 A gate, I fear, I’ll dearly rue;
I gat my death frae twa sweet een,
 Twa lovely een o’ bonnie blue.

‘ Twas not her golden ringlets bright,
 Her lips like roses wat wi’ dew,
Her heaving bosom lily-white—
 It was her een sae bonnie blue.

‘ She talked, she smiled, my heart she wiled,
 She charmed my soul I wist na how,
And ay the stound, the deadly wound,
 Cam frae her een sae bonnie blue.’

And to him, in this first intimate inter-communion of souls, it seemed as though he were exploring some virgin forest, coming upon new beauties and new miracles

at every turn ; while there were entrancing strains in these mysterious groves—no other than the soft musical diphthongs of her speech, the lengthened d-ow-n and t-ow-n and n-o-w ; it was all a kind of dream, only that when she gave him a rose he took her hands in his and held them, and they were real enough, pulsating with happiness, and warm. Then again he found to his amazement that she had never been out of her native land—had never beheld the sun rise over the red islands of the Gulf of Ægina, with the pale columns of the Parthenon on the distant height—nor lain out on the lagoon, watching the procession of gondolas go through the darkness like a golden snake, while a colder radiance began to steal over the frontage of S. Giorgio — nor looked down upon the spacious Conca d'Oro, with its dark green orange groves seeming to tremble through the luminous summer heat ; and here also there were large schemes and imaginative possibilities, suggesting

the time when these two lives, hitherto so unaccountably separated, should flow together, in one consentient and happy channel. But Nan rather drew back from these visionary projects. Was not the present and immediate hour all that human hearts could wish ? And they had so much to confide to each other !

Of a sudden she pulled out her small trinket of a watch.

“ Oh, Sidney, what a shame ! ” she cried. “ We have kept luncheon twenty minutes ! —and never a word from poor Dodo—no, of course not, never a word ! Quick, quick, let us go in ! ”

“ Yes, I will make my apologies, and say good-bye, and be off at once,” he said, as he hurried along with her to the house.

But that was not at all Mr. Summers’s idea. He had directed the parlour-maid to put places for three at the luncheon-table ; and when the young people went in-doors, he was waiting for them, with an invitation

for Sidney Hume which was most gratefully accepted. Furthermore, he seemed rather inclined to offer excuses to his guest for any possible deficiency ; he explained that they had been put to some little inconvenience through being unable to drive in to Henley ; but now the phaeton had been sent home, and there would be no trouble in the future. For what was he apologising, then ?—the absence of cold tongue, or some particular kind of pickle ? Chipped flints would have been welcomed by the young lover so long as he was allowed to take his place opposite Nan.

“ Now, Dodo,” she said, as soon as they had sat down, “ I am going to talk seriously to you. You are always telling me that there is nothing like sunlight and fresh air —always insisting on my being in the open—invaluable for the health and spirits ; and yet here have you been in-doors all this beautiful morning——”

“ I am rather afraid of the heat, Nan,”

he said, uneasily. "It would be very awkward, you know, if any kind of inflammation were to be set up: I think the cool shade of the rooms is better."

"And do you mean to say, Dodo," she exclaimed, "that you are not going to drive in to Henley with me this afternoon, on the very first day the phaeton has come home?"

"I am rather afraid the shaking wouldn't do my arm any good, Nan, and that's the fact," said he. "The doctor is so particular about rest and quiet. But I was thinking you might give Mr. Hume a bit of a lift—just to show him how your Captain can go—that is, if he is not ashamed to sit behind such a circus-looking beast——"

"Oh, to hear such things about my beautiful Captain!" she cried. And then she looked across the table. "Sidney, what do you say?"

"Well, yes, I think he is a beautiful creature," he declared, boldly, "though

I've never seen him in the shafts, you know."

"Oh, he can go—he can go—and with a very pretty action too," Mr. Summers said; and thus it was he got it arranged that he should stay at home, while Nan would drive her lover in to Henley, by way of the Fair Mile.

And very proud was Sidney to be so driven. He, also, thought she had a good style in the handling of reins and whip—when he chanced to pay attention to such matters. But in fact he was now engaged in telling her all about his family—and about the three beautiful Miss Hays—and about Thomas the Rhymer and his Teviot-side prophecy—and similar things. Above all he spoke of his mother, talking in extravagant terms of her wit and shrewdness, her gracious manner, her striking figure and distinguished appearance; and clearly it had become the first wish of his heart that Mrs. Hume, as soon as she

returned to Henley, which was to be on the following Monday, should come away out to Crowhurst, and make the acquaintance of both father and daughter, and see for herself what treasure of a bride he had discovered amid the quiet inland woods. Nan did not respond so joyfully to this proposition. She was silent for a second or two ; but presently the brisk motion and the flying air and the sunlight had brought back her spirits again ; and she was laughing with her speedwell-blue eyes.

Alas ! this was but a sorry parting in the main thoroughfare of Henley, on a Saturday afternoon, with lots of idlers lounging about. But at least he had secured for himself the whole of the next day ; he was to go out to Crowhurst early, and bring with him the engravings and miniatures of which he had been telling her ; and the quiet hours would go by in the still garden. And so, with another look interchanged between those two, he left her and walked away home.

Nevertheless, this ineffectual farewell haunted him with a sense of dissatisfaction and disappointment. He could not bring himself to hunt out those engravings—of the three Miss Hays, of the old tower on Teviot-side, and the like. He went out again, and for a little while stood looking at the busy river; but all the beauty and the quick-glancing life of it—the restless poplars, the yellow bridge, the shimmering water, the long and shapely boats shooting by in their lustrous bronze—had no interest for him. He strolled along until he came in view of the open space of Hart Street; but she had left Hart Street; the Stanhope phaeton was no longer visible. He continued on until he reached Bell Street; and here he was just in time to intercept her—the small groom, having executed the last of his commissions, was crossing the pavement to return to his perch.

“I want to be with you as long as I can,” Sidney said to her; and he got up

and took his seat beside her without further ceremony.

And again he said,

“ You know, bidding good-bye in the middle of Henley is not good-bye at all.”

“ Why not ? ” she asked ; but there was no answer ; and presently they had left the town and were driving along the Fair Mile, the broad thoroughfare barred across by the sunlight and the shadows of the lofty elms.

At the Traveller’s Rest the road begins to ascend ; and at this point he and she surrendered the charge of the vehicle to the groom, that the horse might be walked up the hill, while they leisurely proceeded on foot. But before they reached the much rougher road that strikes off at right angles to lead away towards the heights, skirting as it does so one of the great beech-woods, they came upon a path that intersects this wood, and naturally they followed that, proposing to rejoin the

phaeton at the summit. A few yards of advance, and they already found around them a perfect silence of leaves and tall stems and bracken; a prevailing twilight, also, save that here and there shafts of afternoon sunshine fell slantwise on the tangled undergrowth, and now and again the stirring of the topmost branches of the beeches showed a gleam of blue. Here, indeed, was a more fitting place to say farewell than the main thoroughfare of a small provincial town; here in a hushed, mysterious stillness seeming to shut out all the rest of the world. And ‘until to-morrow’ is easily said; and fervent assurances and reassurances and faithful vows come quickly when the heart is surcharged with them; and the moments are all too short that are given over to passionate embraces, and sweet kisses, and devouring looks. But all the while—shut their ears as they might—they were haunted by an inexorable sound, the sound of wheels

outside on the steep and flinty road. And so at length they had to tear themselves asunder, with some lingering last glances that spoke of ineffable things. When, finally, they emerged into the bewildering daylight—finding themselves just ahead of the slow-dragging phaeton—it must have seemed to them as if they had been wandering in some dim, enchanted forest, such as poets tell of.

CHAPTER VI.

BONDS AND COILS.

“Oh, I will give it him—I will give it him well!” said Mrs. Hume, as the afternoon train was drawing near to Henley. “Leaving two poor lone women all by themselves in London, and running away to Cappadocia, or Upper Egypt, or some such place, hunting for Greek stage-bills——”

“But, I can understand the fascination,” said Lady Helen, contentedly looking out on the placid landscape. “Indeed, I think I must have caught a little of the infection myself. I find the British Museum quite interesting now; and I never see a handful of old seals and rings in a shop-window without wondering whether there might

not be a Greek gem amongst them—one of those archaic ones, you know, with the long skeleton figures. This intaglio I have got for him—this Hercules and the lion—looks all right, I imagine; it cannot be quite modern, anyway, for the grooves in the sard are polished as perfectly as the surface——”

“ Ah, Helen, dear,” observed her companion, in sentimental fashion, “ he will never value anything so much as the Santa Maura ring you gave him in exchange for that little keepsake I see you still wear. And that reminds me; sometimes I think I shall never die happy until he and you and I—just the three of us—go away on a yachting cruise through those Greek islands. You can do it so easily now; steamer to Corfu, then hire the yacht there, and off you go to Santa Maura, and Ithaca, and the Gulf of Patras, and Lepanto. Non cuivis homini, you know; it isn’t given to everybody to go to Corinth

—in a hundred-ton schooner; but I would live on potatoes and milk all the rest of my life to secure myself such a delicious voyage. Wouldn't that be a chance for you and him to search about for old Greek gems!—and who knows, perhaps a poor body like myself might pick up a little bit of modern silver embroidery. And don't you think he would make a capital guide for us, if we went across to Tiryns and Mycenae? ”

Lady Helen was discreetly silent; for this proposal seemed mysteriously to involve something else. In what capacity was she expected to form one of that travelling trio? It was a question she could neither ask nor answer.

But now the train was slowing into the station; and of a sudden Mrs. Hume, happening to cast her eyes forward, joyfully called out :

“ Why, here he is! Here is a piece of condescension! Here is the rascal him-

self, come along to meet us.” And then she added, with a laugh: “There’s one thing about those brats of mine—they’re easy to recognize at a distance, the lasses as well as the lads. They’re *geyan kenspeckle*, as their forefathers would have said.”

And amidst her motherly pride and admiration, when this tall and handsome son of hers came forward to open the door for them, she forgot all about the terrible scolding she had undertaken to administer; and Lady Helen, too, received him with a favouring glance and smile.

“I saw your carriage outside the station,” he said to her, “and I guessed you would be coming by this train.”

“Well,” she said to him, “I have been telling Mrs. Hume that she might as well drive on at once with me to the Hall, and then we could go on the river, and have a look at the house-boats——”

She hesitated.

"Would you like me to go with you?" he said, dutifully. "The punt you have is more comfortable for ladies than a hired boat—and I could pole it along for you——"

"Will you be so kind?" said she, with pleasant and grateful eyes; and in a minute or two, when the footman had brought their things from the railway-carriage, they found themselves in the open barouche, driving along by the busy river, and through the no less busy town which was all bedecked now with bunting at the headquarters of the various rowing-clubs.

The strangest thing was that on this first glimpse of her after some little time of absence she had looked unexpectedly and unaccountably old. Very elegant-looking, no doubt, and refined; the pale features, the beautifully arched eyebrows, the conscious gray eyes with their dark lashes, and the fine bulk of her raven-black hair, all very effective and striking;

but there was no fascination—there was no bewilderment—there was no glamour and radiance as of youth and sunshine—nothing to cause the heart to tremble with the mere sense of proximity. He recalled certain speculations of his, in the self-communion of solitary evening hours at Lilac Lodge; and now these speculations seemed to him to have been not ‘sane’ at all, but quite the reverse of that, and impracticable, and futile, and hopeless. Yet she was most gracious to him. When he accidentally addressed her as Lady Helen, she appeared a little bit surprised, and even amused ; but she made no protest. She told him of the intaglio she had picked up for him, and hoped it was a good one, though it was not like anything she could find figured in Baron Stosch’s work. She offered to postpone the survey of the house-boats if he thought the poling of the punt would be oppressively warm work ; for indeed along the river-valley the heat was

considerable, there being not a breath of wind—even up on the wooded heights the blue columns of smoke from this or that red-tiled mansion rose without deflection into the golden afternoon. And she would have both Mrs. Hume and Sidney promise to come and dine at Monks-Hatton Hall on the Friday evening, the better to see the illuminations.

When they reached the Hall, she begged to be excused for half a minute, that she might go and report her arrival to her mother; and accordingly they went into the library to wait for her. And no sooner had she left them than Mrs. Hume addressed her son, in something of an undertone.

“Well, Mr. Sid,” said she, “I hope you feel properly crushed and penitent?”

He turned from the books and the busts, and regarded her with a glance of inquiry.

“I must say dear Helen is the most forgiving and good-natured creature in the

world," Mrs. Hume went on. "And it is all the more surprising in a girl who is so much sought after—and who has got so much independence of character. Why, any other girl would have been most indignant; your treatment of her has been really too bad; and yet here she comes down from town, and meets you, and is as amiable and friendly as ever; and she has been hunting in the old shops for cameos for you; and I am almost certain she has given Captain Erle his *congé* at last."

"My treatment of her?" he repeated, in a vaguely astonished way. But he could say nothing further; for at this moment Lady Helen appeared, followed by a servant bringing cushions for the punt. And so they passed through the open French windows, and went down the steps, and crossed the spacious lawn leading to the river-side, where they found the shining bronze-hued craft that was to take them away on their tour of inspection.

Nevertheless as he proceeded to pilot them through the intricacies of the swarming river—now pausing to watch a swinging eight go by, and again making way for a couple of maidens paddling their own canoe with a happy disregard of all surroundings—the phrase his mother had used haunted him. His treatment of Lady Helen? What had he done? Or left undone? What had she been generously pleased to forgive? It is true he had come away from town in the midst of the gaieties of the season; but he had played the part of squire of dames for a considerable while; and he did not regard himself as pledged to remain in that office for ever and ever. All the same these insinuations and reproaches of Mrs. Hume caused him some disquiet; and he accompanied the two ladies on their visits—for they soon found themselves among friends—in a perfunctory fashion. If there was any mystery of entanglement or error he was impatient to have it cleared

up at once—so that the promiscuous chatter of these people over tea and cake, and ices and strawberries, had no sort of interest for him.

An opportunity arrived in due course. When, their visiting over, they returned to the Hall, Lady Helen was for ordering the carriage to take them home; but Mrs. Hume would not hear of such a thing; she and her long lad of a son, she said, would walk back to Lilac Lodge. And hardly had these two set out than she reverted to the very subject that had been occupying his mind.

“ Yes, indeed,” she said, “ Helen has shown herself most forgiving—most forgiving. I could hardly have expected it of her; for she is proud, and impetuous, and wilful; she has plenty of spirit and independence. I shouldn’t have been at all surprised if she had received you in a very different manner this afternoon.”

“ Now what is all this about? ” he de-

manded—for he was simple and direct of speech himself, and therefore intolerant of mystification.

“What is it all about?” she repeated. “You don’t know? When your going away from London like that, and remaining away, might very easily have led any one to imagine that the engagement between you and her was broken off.”

“The engagement? What engagement?” said he, midway between anger and stupefaction.

“You must be quite well aware,” said she, but without meeting his eyes, “that every one assumes there is an engagement between Helen Yorke and you.”

“Then every one assumes all wrong,” he made answer, bluntly. “There is nothing of the kind. And I am not responsible for what a lot of idiots may assume.”

“Nor am I,” his mother said, with simple dignity. “It is enough for me if Helen herself assumes that there is an engagement.”

"Oh, and I am not to have any say in the matter!" he exclaimed.

"I do not know what you may have said, or left unsaid," she rejoined, quickly. "It is not always by spoken words that understandings are arrived at, and the course of lives shaped. No engagement? Sidney—my dear child! Well, you know that I am no eavesdropper or spy; and that night, at Lady Kenrick's, when I was seeking you and Helen, to get you away, I should certainly not have gone into the conservatory, if I had known I should find you two standing there with clasped hands."

"Oh, that was only a piece of tomfoolery," he said, with impatience. "A compact—about calling each other by our Christian name——"

"And is that nothing?" said this tall and statuesque and silver-haired lady, whose voice was suave. "And is the exchanging of keepsakes nothing—and wearing them ostentatiously? Why, what do you

suppose those people on the river thought this afternoon, when they found Helen going about with us?—what but that the old relationship which was notorious enough in London had been resumed, as was natural, when she came down to Henley. Come, come, Sidney! I know that young people like to have their secrets; but you cannot expect me to be blinder than the rest of the world; and all I wished to say, and all I wish to say now, is that Helen is a dear good girl, who has far more forgiveness in her composition than I could have hoped for.”

Now he had no heart to quarrel with his mother; for he was very fond and proud of her; but he felt that he was being wound round in coils that were none of his twisting; and instinctively he grew restive and resentful and indignant. As they were crossing the garden to enter the house, he said to her—

“Look here, Mater, let’s have an end of

this. I tell you, there has never been a single word of love-making between Helen Yorke and me, nor anything else that could be misconstrued into love-making. And there are other reasons why there never could be any engagement between us, as I will explain to you some other time——”

She had reached the open door ; and she turned and faced him—for he seemed rather inclined to remain in the garden ; and the penetrating regard of this august dame had no kind of fear in it.

“ Misconstruction ? ” she said, in a measured and incisive way. “ It appears to me, my dear Sidney, that those who give ground for misconception are bound to make what reparation they can—the only reparation possible where a young lady’s name is concerned. I say you are bound in honour to Helen Yorke ; I say your honour is at stake, even if there were nothing else to be considered. Yes, and I will say this, too, that I never yet heard—

no, nor did any one ever yet hear—of a Hay or a Hume drawing back, where his honour was involved.” And therewith she turned and swept away from him: she knew that her words had struck deep.

At first indeed he was all aflame with rage—for his common-sense was up in indignant revolt; yet his wrath was directed not so much against his mother as against the contrariety of circumstances and the stupidity and malignant intermeddling of mankind. Nay, at this very moment, he was for going right away back to Lady Helen herself, and demanding of her if anything in his conduct towards her could justify in the remotest degree such an amazing misinterpretation. But calmer counsels prevailed. Might not Lady Helen also have been among the purblind, piecing insignificant things together, and fashioning impossible horoscopes? Might not she, too, be inclined to say, with the same incomprehensible irrelevance, that never Hay nor

Hume was known to draw back, where his honour was involved? It was altogether a maddening imbroglio—with no way out clearly visible.

At dinner not one syllable was said of this over-brooding subject; Mrs. Hume—knowing that her words would be well remembered—had now returned to her ordinary mood of brisk good humour; she was telling him all about the other members of her scattered family, their plans for the autumn, and what not. He listened attentively enough; perhaps thinking in a forlorn way of his own little plan, which he had hoped to put in execution at once, for bringing about a meeting between his mother and his peerless Nan; and probably cursing the fatuity and perversity with which the best-laid schemes ‘gang aft agley.’ This was not an auspicious moment to ask a critical-eyed, exacting, and somewhat dictatorial mother to go away out into the solitude of the beechwoods, to make the acquaintance of

the roseate, shining, summer-natured Princess he had discovered there.

After dinner, Mrs. Hume having her own affairs to attend to, he wandered out by himself in the twilight, and strolled down to the river-side. And now all the sleepy languor of the afternoon had fled ; there was a fresh and cool breeze rustling and bending the tall Lombardy poplars and tossing the drooping tresses of the willows on the lawns ; while the aquatic world had woken up to a new life—eights, fours, and pairs, dingheys, steam-launches and canoes interweaving warp and woof on the bosom of the stream. Spectators were clustered on the bridge ; damsels on horseback were scampering through the meadows, with an occasional pull-up to look at a passing crew ; the swans, in unmolested reaches, appeared to be holding mysterious converse with the bottom, but nevertheless keeping an alert eye for anything tossed them from the bank ; while here and there an azure or

crimson-jacketed youth, oblivious of all this varied activity, would leisurely ply his pair of sculls, fondly regarding Schön-Rohtraut in the stern—Schön-Rohtraut in the lightest-hued of boating costumes, with the tiller ropes brought idly over her shoulder. The golden light had now gone from the evening skies; a silver-gray dusk was stealing over the wide pastures and the wooded uplands. It seemed a peaceable, happy, contented kind of universe to live in—if only there were no busybodies indulging in monstrous suppositions, and malignant circumstances destroying one's pet schemes.

But after all he was going out to Crowhurst next morning; and out to Crowhurst next morning he accordingly went; there compensation awaited him, and assurance, and the gladdest of welcomes. Yet no sooner had he arrived than he was bidden to depart; for Nan was ordered to take him away for a long drive on so fine a

morning; Mr. Summers's arm, curiously enough, still hindering him from accompanying these young people. And so, as soon as the cream-coloured Captain and the phaeton had been brought round, off they went; with no thought of descending into the turmoil of the town and the riverside, but on the contrary making away for Bix, and Nettlebed, and Nuffield, by lonely highways, through still beechwoods, pausing at times, on some stretch of upland heath, to look abroad over the wide Berkshire plain, beyond which the far western hills were but as silver-gray films in the white glare of sun and sky. Then when they came to any steep incline they gave the reins to the diminutive groom; and descended, and went forward on foot, or lingered behind, as best pleased them; and being thus left free, and alone with themselves, in the silence of the summer morning, they could make experiments with new pet names for each other, and invent

petulant misunderstandings for the sake of making up, and interchange confidences about the most trivial matters, which, so soon as they were known to be personal to either, immediately became of most momentous importance. The great humble-bees went drowsily booming by; the pink and white roses in the hedge were fragrant in the heat; a million diamonds sparkled on the glassy leaves of a holly-bush; a distant corn-field was scarlet with poppies up toward the rounded summit. The world was so full of beautiful things!—and their hearts were so full of happiness.

But still—

“Nan,” said he, “suppose there is something you know you ought to laugh at; and suppose you allow it to trouble you; and suppose you call yourself a fool for allowing it to trouble you; very well: which you is it that calls the other you a fool—which is your real self? ”

“If these were the problems, Sidney,”

she said, “they put before you at All Souls’, I don’t wonder that you came away and settled down among your own books at Henley. But what is the trouble? Won’t you tell it me ? ”

And he did tell her, in a measure, the story of his relationship with Lady Helen; and he told her also something of what his mother had said the day before; though he carefully avoided her phrase about his honour being at stake; that was too serious, considering that he was making light of all this embroilment. And meanwhile Nan’s usually happy and sunny face had grown unwontedly thoughtful and pre-occupied.

“ Is she so very beautiful, Sidney ? ” she asked, in a low voice.

“ Lady Helen ? Oh, she is good-looking enough—distinguished-looking, you know—and elegant and graceful, and all that. And clever too; rather too sharp, indeed, when her temper is ruffled. But she can

talk ; and she's learned in all the new religions—or irreligions ; and she keeps abreast of all the latest scientific discoveries—at least she goes to soirées at South Kensington. Oh, yes, she is clever——”

“ Is she so very handsome, Sidney ? ” she asked again.

“ Well, she has a good figure ; and, as I say, she is graceful and elegant, and she dresses beautifully,” he replied, in a vague kind of way. Then of a sudden, as if by some inspiration or insight, he altered his tone, and said boldly : “ But I will tell you this, Nan : if you and she were in the same room together, no one would look her way. Why, you don’t in the least seem to understand that there is a kind of splendour about you that is almost bewildering. And you don’t understand what wonderful eyes you have—how they flash and wound—you don’t know how they flashed and wounded a poor casual stranger who chanced to be going by the front of St. Mary’s Church.”

“ And your mother expects you to marry her ? ” Nan asked again, in the same low voice.

“ Blessed are they who expect nothing ! ” he answered—for he would not have her mind overclouded on this fair morning.

“ And perhaps Lady Helen also ? ”

“ How can I tell ? That is not a question to be asked of a young lady, unless you are pretty sure of the answer. And if there did not seem to be some kind of madness in the air at present, I should have said it was about the last thing that could have got into Lady Helen’s head. However, I should not have bothered you with all this nonsense: let us have done with it. And I am going to give my mother something else to think of; something more reasonable, and wholesomer, and pleasanter; I’m going to bring her out to see you, Nan, either tomorrow or next day.”

She looked up, startled.

“ Oh, do not be alarmed,” he went on.

“I shall say nothing of our engagement. I have all my dark scheme planned out; I mean to introduce her to your father and you by a kind of accident; and then she will form her first impressions of you without any sort of prejudice. Do you see? And you will find her a delightful woman—as soon as this absurdity has got cleared out of her head; the sort of woman to make friends with everybody—full of fun and good-humour and frank kindness. She likes her own way a little, you know; but then she has been allowed that all her life; and I am sure that not only her own family, but also the families they have intermarried with, would tell you that never once had she shown a trace of selfishness. She likes regulating things and managing, no doubt; but it is never for herself. And my forecast is this, Nan: that in about two minutes after seeing you—in about one minute after seeing you—she will love you.”

When after their long roundabout drive

—which was chiefly a wandering about on foot through still woodland ways—they returned to Crowhurst, Sidney had to reluctantly say good-bye: he had promised his mother and Lady Helen to be in attendance at a certain hour. And when he had gone, Nan and her father went out into the garden, among the white campanulas, and the clustered roses, and the trained honeysuckle sweetening all the surrounding air. He thought she was rather silent, as they took their little walk together, arm-in-arm. He glanced at her once or twice, furtively and anxiously. And then he said—

“There has been no trouble, Nan? You seem rather quiet. There has been nothing to trouble you?”

“Oh, no,” she said, rousing herself to cheerfulness. “Nothing at all. I was only thinking. Sidney says he will bring Mrs. Hume out to see us to-morrow or next day.”

“Yes?” he said, in his grave and tranquil way. “Well, that is as it should be. And I hope Mrs. Hume and you will become very good friends.”

But by-and-by, as they were strolling up and down the paths, between the borders of dark blue lobelia, he said quite timidly—

“Nan, I have been considering. Perhaps you would rather that I was out of the way when Mrs. Hume calls?”

She turned and stared at him, not comprehending; or denying to herself that she did, or could, comprehend.

“It is you she is coming to see,” he explained, with the strangest humility. “She might not want to see me at all. And perhaps you would rather that I kept out of the way—I could go for a walk, you know, while she was here.”

She looked at him again.

“Yes, that is a likely thing!” she said—with proud and tremulous lips.

CHAPTER VII.

IN A LIBRARY, AND ELSEWHERE.

WHEN, on the following afternoon, Mrs. Hume was asked by her son to go for a little walk into the country, she was not so surprised as many mothers would have been in the circumstances; for these two had always been great companions, when the boy was home from college; their tall figures were a conspicuous and familiar feature in and about Henley. On this occasion he said they ought to get away from the tumult of the river-side; they would have enough of that on the regatta days; an hour or two amidst the quiet of the beechwoods, or out on the upland heaths, would be a pleasant change. And

to this she blithely assented ; she was in a most happy and gracious humour ; for now she was quite convinced—since he had made no further protest, nor, indeed, reverted to the matter in any way—that her warning words had taken effect, and that he had resolved to acquit himself in regard to Lady Helen as honour seemed to demand. So all was well ; her heart was full of blissful content ; and it was in a most cheerful mood that she set out with him—these two looking like brother and sister, but for the silver-white hair—to leave this busy little town, by way of the long ascent of Gravel Hill.

And very briskly and brightly she talked and chatted to him, of many matters and many men and women ; and when she came, by accident as it were, to Lady Helen Yorke, she did not fear to mention her either. Yet, strangely enough, it was not in praise of her dearest Helen that she spoke, it was rather in disparagement.

“Spoiled? Oh, yes—I’ve often said it. How could she help being spoiled? A reigning beauty has to encounter that kind of thing, of course—paragraphs in the papers about her superb appearance at such and such a reception—photographs in the shop-windows—coloured lithographs in the supplements of women’s journals—all that is not wholesome for a young girl. And then the way the men run after her! I wonder how many offers of marriage she has refused; and naturally that puts it into a young woman’s head that she can throw the handkerchief whenever and wherever she pleases; and she becomes more and more finical—and perhaps even contemptuous of the mankind around her. And yet,” continued this skilful detractor, “she is docile in some cases; she likes to learn; she has been reading up lately all sorts of books about ancient Greece, since I gave her a hint as to what you were working at; and only the other day she was wondering

if you would tell her whether she ought to keep to the familiar *Mycenae*, or go half-way and say *Mykenae*, or go all the way and say *Mukenai*. And that is another thing: she is profoundly interested in excavations; she would like to try some little private enterprise—Syracuse she was suggesting——”

“ Alexandria would suit her turn better,” said he—“the ancient Alexandria, that has lain buried for centuries; but she would have to have a pretty large fortune, and the Egyptian government as well, at her back.”

“ Oh, she will be a very rich woman when her father dies ! ” Mrs. Hume said, seriously. “ Or even when she marries, I suppose, he will do something handsome by her. And I was thinking myself,” she continued, in a more off-hand way, “ of some little joint undertaking. For example, if Helen were resolute about it, I shouldn’t mind coming in with some fragment of my small savings—with your permission, of course, for all that, such as it is, is coming to you ;

and out of your own capital you might be willing to subscribe something ; so that the three of us would have the whole project in our own hands. And don't suppose that I want to stand in front of the ruins to be photographed, and to appear in the frontispiece of the book ; not at all ; you two only ; I should be behind the camera, making tea. And what a useful book that would be for me—with your name, and Helen's, also, on the titlepage—I mean useful as a wedding present : I declare my poor wits are incapable of devising anything new, and my poor purse is drained. But a book with my son's name on the titlepage, that would be something—and—and if Helen's name were there also—that would be a happy conjunction, wouldn't it ? ”

The prospect of being allowed to dig at Alexandria did not appear to excite his enthusiasm, the fact being that at this point his eyes were fixed on a certain white gate, and he had become the prey of an over-

powering anxiety. For, as they drew near to Crowhurst, he found himself more and more perplexed as to inventing any rational and plausible excuse for calling there ; and he was vaguely thinking of continuing their walk, and postponing the awkward moment until their return. But as it chanced, as they came up to the gate, Mrs. Hume, looking over the bars, said—

“ What a fine show of pansies ! ”

She paused, as there seemed to be no one about. The pansies were a broad border round a plot in the front lawn—pale yellow and snow-white they were, a goodly show. But the next plot had a border of another plant which was unfamiliar to her—a plant with dark-green lanceolate leaves, and spiky, tubular, orange-red flowers.

“ I wonder what that is,” she said, incidentally.

“ Let me go in and ask,” said he, in his desperate case. “ I know the people very well—oh, yes—I have made their acquaint-

ance—a Mr. Summers and his daughter who have come to live here—the fact is, I have been thinking that you ought to call as they are comparatively strangers——”

She seemed a little surprised; but she was not particularly sensitive or backward; besides she was ready to agree to anything after his tacit acquiescence in her great Eastern scheme—for at least he had brought no immediate objection.

“Oh, very well, if you like,” she said, at haphazard. “But I have brought no visiting-card with me.”

“They are sure to be at home—and they will give you a cup of tea,” he said.

So they opened the gate, went up to the house, rang the bell, entered, and were shown into the small drawing-room.

“Who are they, did you say?” she asked, as she took a seat.

“Mr. Summers—and his daughter,” said he—with his ears trembling for footsteps.

It was Nan who first appeared, and

now Mrs. Hume was nothing less than astonished: this was not at all the kind of country maiden she had expected to find in a road-side villa or transformed farm-house, but a young creature of quite distinctive and remarkable beauty, who had a quiet self-possession and a perfect manner as she bade her visitors welcome, and whose voice was extremely musical and pleasant, with no trace of rustic accent. Mrs. Hume was a shrewd and quick-thinking woman: why had Sidney never said a word to her before of this new acquaintance? Young men were given to talking of pretty girls; he could not be quite so indifferent to them—although he had generally shown himself indifferent—as to have forgotten even the existence of this exceptionally and even remarkably attractive young person? Mrs. Hume was a little alarmed and bewildered. The girl was very charming, very modest, and her voice was winning; but what was Sidney doing in this house? And why had

he so carefully concealed his knowledge of these people ?

Nan's father now entered the room ; and instantly it struck Mrs. Hume that she had seen this peculiar-looking man—and no doubt his pretty daughter also—somewhere before, perhaps at a railway station. He came forward, and was introduced to her, and said a word or two ; then he took a seat rather towards the window, as if he would leave Nan to continue the conversation, as if he wished to be ignored and forgotten. But that was not at all according to Nan's view of the situation. In answer to her visitor's friendly inquiries, she would say, "My father does not care to know many people," or "My father is quite content with this quiet life," and so forth ; and she would appeal to him ; and drag him into the general talk, whether he wished it or no. Nevertheless, it was apparent that he would rather keep in the background ; he looked out of the window

mostly, or at the floor ; he would have Nan, with her musical speech, and her pretty ways learnt at the vicarage, represent this small household. Mrs. Hume looked curiously from one to the other of those two.

Then after some little while spent mostly in conversation between the elderly lady and the young girl, Mr. Summers said (quite humbly—yet anxious to help Nan a little)—

“ Nan, shall I ring for some tea ? ”

But with that Mrs. Hume rose.

“ Oh, no, please don’t,” she said, with a fine frankness and good-humour. “ Let me apologise for our intrusion. The fact is, I saw a plant in your front-garden I did not know the name of; and my son said he had made your acquaintance; and so we took the liberty of coming in.”

For a second there was an awkward pause. Nan did not know what to say next. It was her father who came to her rescue.

“We shall be glad to see you at any time,” he said, in his grave, submissive fashion.

“Oh, thank you—thank you. Good-bye—good-bye!” said this tall, silver-haired lady in her most gracious way; and then mother and son went along the passage: Mr. Summers attentively opened the door for them; and Nan stood on the threshold, to have a parting glimpse of her lover. Not any one of the four had remembered aught of the nameless plant that had been made the excuse for this singular interview.

But as they moved away from the house, Mrs. Hume’s mind was filled with a dim and dark suspicion that she had been led into a trap; and, the moment that Sidney spoke, she became certain of it.

“Well, Mater, what do you think of her?” said he, concealing his anxiety.

And she also was capable of concealment. It was the very question she had

anticipated ; but she was far too astute to reveal the sharp apprehension it caused her.

"Oh, she is a pretty little thing," she answered, with assumed carelessness.

'A pretty little thing ?' He could scarcely believe his ears. Was this all the impression that had been produced by his incomparable Nan ? Does one look on the moonlight shining on the sea of a summer night, and say indifferently, 'Oh, yes, well enough !'

"Little ?" he remonstrated. "I don't see how you can call her little. She doesn't belong to the sons and daughters of Anak, as our family do ; but she is not little. I should think most people would consider her rather tall—because of her slim and graceful figure. But that is hardly the question. It is hardly a question of height. Was there nothing else that struck you ?—the simplicity and charm of her manner ?—the unusual, you

might almost say the extraordinary beauty of her eyes? You ought to know what a good manner is. If it comes to that, you ought to know what beautiful eyes are. And yet you only say, ‘Oh, a pretty little thing’!”

His acute disappointment was but too manifest; nor did his insidious flattery in any way mitigate the nameless fears that now beset her.

“It is not a matter of much concern, is it?” she said, with admirable composure, as they walked along. “But who are they? Why have you not spoken of them before? I fancy I have seen the man—the father—somewhere. Who is he? What is he? What does he do?”

“He doesn’t do anything,” he replied, in profound chagrin. Had Nan’s beauty and her musical speech so entirely failed to conquer? And if so, why was it so? He did not remember, at this perturbed and unsettling moment, that the shining

eyes of one woman shine upon another woman in vain.

“But what has he been, then?” said Mrs. Hume.

“A trainer of race-horses, I believe,” he replied, curtly: he did not care what he answered, now that she had not succumbed to Nan at the very first glance.

“Really, Sidney,” the other said, “you seem to be a little complaisant in forming your acquaintance. A trainer of race-horses——”

“I can assure you, my dear mother,” said he, “that in the opinion of a great number of people in this country a trainer of race-horses is a very important person; and there is no reason whatever why he should not be a perfectly honest and upright man. But what has that got to do with me? Mr. Summers is no longer a trainer of race-horses. I judge of him as he is. I see his admirable conduct with regard to his daughter—his extraordinary affection

for her—his constant care of her—his sacrifice of himself whenever he thinks he can add one jot to her happiness. And to tell you the truth, mother, I thought you would have been a little more impressed by—Miss Summers. You don't see her like every day, either in appearance, or manner, or disposition. And yet you find nothing to say but ‘a pretty little thing’ ! ”

“ I do not understand your disappointment,” Mrs. Hume observed, with a certain coldness. “ I might, perhaps, if I understood the origin of your interest in this girl, who, you must remember, is entirely a stranger to me.” And thereafter for a time they walked on in silence, doubtless with many thoughts.

That night at dinner she said to him, in an unconcerned kind of fashion—

“ How did you come to know those people, Sidney ? ” And the phrase ‘those people’ sounded to him cruel: it seemed

not only to hold Nan at arm's length but to banish her a hundred miles away.

"Merely by accident," he responded, without heart. For he had magnified his mother's indifference, or her vague suspicion into antagonism; and it seemed hopeless to try to overcome it. Where Nan, in all the glamour of her youthful beauty, and with the soft charm of her speech, had failed, how was he to succeed? Nevertheless he would make one more effort. "Really, mother," he said, "I cannot understand why you should be so blind. It is not a question of prejudice or prepossession; it is a question of obvious fact. Any stranger, whoever he or she might be, taken out to Crowhurst, must see plainly enough that the girl is of quite unusual beauty and fascination. Other qualities, of mind and disposition, you might get to know afterwards—and I think they would repay the trouble—but what I say is that a mere outsider must admit that she has a most

graceful figure, and refined features, and quite wonderful eyes. A passer-by in the street could not fail to notice them. And I should have thought that one of the ‘beautiful Miss Hays’ would have been the very first to recognize them.”

“I have said nothing against the girl’s appearance,” observed his mother, distantly.

“Then what else can you say against her?” he demanded, with imprudent haste. “Why should you be so prejudiced against her? What little you saw of her—her mere external beauty—would extort admiration from any stranger in the street; and why should you assume that in her disposition, her character, her training, or what not, there is something that does not correspond—some defect that you cannot name——”

“Really, Sidney, your language is most extraordinary!” she protested. “When have I said anything at all against the girl?”

“ Then why should you be prejudiced against her ? ” he went on, with some distressing consciousness that he was only beating the air. “ It isn’t what you say —it is what you don’t say. You meet a quite rare and remarkable creature, and you talk with her and have every opportunity of judging her, and she shows you every kindness she can, in her modest and gentle fashion ; and so far from being impressed, you come away saying some slighting thing about her. What is that if not prejudice ? —the most incomprehensible prejudice ! ”

“ I did not know you were looking forward to my being impressed,” she made answer, calmly. “ And I am not aware of having given way to any prejudice. Why should I be prejudiced ? I don’t understand you at all, Sidney ; or why should you be concerned about my opinion of—of—what was the young lady’s name ? ” And with that she changed the subject ; but the note of keen mortification that had rung through

this plaint of his, remained in her mind, and in no wise tended to lessen her secret alarm.

Nevertheless the next day, which was the first of the regatta-days, brought her some reassurance. Both mother and son were the guests of Lady Helen, for the lawn at Monks-Hatton Hall afforded an excellent view of the course; and amid the coming and going of many visitors, between the races, Lady Helen chose to make it apparent that Mrs. Hume and Sidney were her very particular friends; while he on his part was humbly and obediently attentive to his fair young hostess, and that to an unwonted degree. The truth is, in his present difficult, and even bewildering, position, he was anxious to find out what was really expected of him. Had she, also, adopted the preposterous misapprehension that had got into his mother's head? And if not—for it seemed hardly credible—would she not become his ally? What better court of

appeal could there be, if his honour was impugned? So he sought to establish very amicable relations with Lady Helen; and she in turn was pleased to receive these little advances with gracious favour.

“Sidney,” she said to him, in the early part of the afternoon, “don’t you think it very hard that poor mamma should be shut up and have no part in all this gaiety beyond looking out from a window? Don’t you think we might go and pay her a little visit? We should never be missed by these people. Besides, Mrs. Hume knows every one who is here, or who is likely to come.” For indeed there were a good many guests and visitors in possession of this quiet retreat, strolling about the lawn, or under the umbrageous limes and sycamores and purple beeches, or seated beneath the vast Japanese umbrellas—the scarlet and black of which blazed in the sunlight amid so much soft green—or wandering into the cool marquee, where there was a convenient

buffet, with all kinds of beverages and cakes and fruit.

“Oh, yes, certainly,” said he, with prompt obedience, and not stopping to consider that his being singled out in this way might seem rather invidious and significant.

They left the lawn, went up the gray steps, passed in under the sunblinds and through the library, and ascended the wide staircase, Sidney being at length ushered into the room where the invalid, or hypochondriac, was seated at the window, looking out on the hushed swarming of the river. The little pale old lady, sighing much, appeared none the less pleased to be thus remembered. She even hinted that Sidney might remain with her for a time, while her daughter returned to her guests. Lady Helen, however, would not hear of that.

“No, no, we shall be discovered. Sidney and I are playing truant, and we must not stay too long, or we shall be caught. Good-

bye, mamma, dear ; I hope Mrs. Spink is looking well after you.”

But if she was in a hurry to leave the invalid’s room, she was in no such hurry to pass through the library below. And indeed it was a seductive place to linger in ; for those fascinating shelves of beautiful bindings, and the tall scagliola columns, and the decorated frieze and ceiling, and the cases of miniatures, and the statuettes and busts were all in a cool shadow, grateful enough as contrasted with the glare outside.

“I wish,” she said, as she saw his eyes involuntarily attracted by that array of books—“I wish, Sidney, you would come over here some day, when you have two or three hours to spare, and you could tell me something about the treasures in this library. For there are treasures, I know that, though my father does not care about such things. It was my grandfather who mainly built up the collection. There are some good Caxtons, for example ; but I want to be told

more particularly about them. And first editions, too. Here is the '23 folio—the Shakespeare folio; would you consider this a tall copy?"

She moved towards the shelves, and of course he followed.

"Take it out for me, please," she said.

He did as he was bid. He took out the precious volume, and placed it on a table; and while he was examining the introductory pages—the Ben Jonson sonnet, the Droeshout portrait, and so forth—she was standing very close to him, her head also bent down. Her dress of cream-white serge, with its thick bands of gold cord, had some furry white stuff round the throat. Was it from that soft and downy collar there came a breath of perfume that was plainly perceptible? And she would also turn over the leaves, so that her fingers touched his occasionally by fortuitous accident. Did he know, she asked, of some extraordinary repetitions in the text that

the worthy Heminge and Condell had overlooked ? And was it not a shame that even the parting between Romeo and Juliet should have been hashed about ? ‘ Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast : would I were sleep and peace so sweet to rest ! ’—clearly that was Romeo’s speech. She repeated the lines very prettily, in a gentle undertone. And in reply he said that, as far as he knew about such things, this seemed a very perfect copy—a treasure indeed.

When he had put the folio back, she took him to the cases of miniatures that were set on tall stands. And here also she held him enchainèd over those portraits of admirals and generals, of ladies in short-waisted dresses and shining curls, of young squires in high coat collars, of fair young girls with ivory complexion and puffed sleeves. But although he and she were again standing so close together that the cream-white serge just touched his arm, there was for him no

shiver and thrill of magnetism in that contiguity: he merely asked her if she had ever read of the elaborate little tricks and dodges with which the miniature-painters lent brightness to the eyes of their models and gave brilliancy to their hair. She lingered over these cases; they seemed to interest her; and he was bound to profess a like interest. A distant sound of cheering came from along the crowded banks; but apparently she had forgotten all about the regatta and her visitors and guests. This spacious apartment was secluded and quiet and gratefully cool; and there were many other things to claim attention—some admirable bronzes, for example. And if he had relapsed into the formal ‘Lady Helen,’ she, at least, remained true to their compact, and called him ‘Sidney’ in soft tones.

The door was opened: Mrs. Spink appeared—caught sight of these two—looked alarmed—exclaimed “Oh, I beg your pardon!” and at once withdrew again.

“That woman,” said Lady Helen, vindictively, “is just made of eyes—she is all eyes. Fortunately she was born without a tongue. She takes in everything she sees, and says nothing.”

“But don’t you think we should go back to the lawn?” he suggested. “Your friends will miss you.”

“Yes, of course—yes, I suppose so,” she said; and no doubt the petulant air she wore as she walked to the open window owed its origin to Mrs. Spink’s untoward intrusion. “I dare say it is one’s duty to go and look at a lot of school-boys splashing the water!”

She preceded him down the wide gray steps; and presently she had rejoined her friends, in capital spirits apparently, going from one little group to another, and making herself the life and soul of each as she did so. For she could be very entertaining, and merry, and humorous when she chose; and, truth to say, no one seemed

to pay much heed to the racing on the river; this broad lawn might have been a London drawing-room so far as the occupations of the people were concerned. She played the part of hostess excellently well—moving hither and thither with swift, amusing speech and gracious looks. But she appeared to have no further word for Sidney Hume.

When mother and son returned to Lilac Lodge, the former was in the happiest of moods; for she was convinced that all was going satisfactorily again, and that she could dismiss those dim disquietudes that had arisen in her mind.

“My dear Sid,” she remarked, gaily, as they sat at dinner, “are you aware that Helen and you were absent for quite an unconscionable time this afternoon—and absent together—conspicuously absent, as one might say? Not that I object, not at all; but the fact is that Helen, though the very dearest creature in the world, is apt

to be the least bit wilful and headstrong ; and it should be for you to teach her a little discretion, especially on a public occasion of this kind. Oh, yes—I saw you—I saw you cross the lawn together—I saw you disappear into the library—— ”

“ Mother, when will you have done with this nonsense ? ” he said—and there was something in his tone that caused her face to grow grave—something she seemed to dread : her raillery vanished. “ I tell you there is nothing between Lady Helen and me,” he continued, explicitly. “ If ever I marry, there is for me but the one woman in the world ; and you saw her yesterday, at Crowhurst. She, too, knows that ; and we are both content to wait, to see what circumstances may arise. I had hoped you would have taken more kindly to her—I had indeed hoped for that ; but perhaps you may, when you get to know her better.”

She listened, staring at him, and for the moment struck into utter and abject

silence. Her worst fears, that she had again and again striven to thrust aside, were now confirmed. And to her this thing that loomed ahead was nothing less than an appalling tragedy—the death-blow to her most cherished schemes—her life, successful all the way through, finding its climax in failure and dismay. But Sidney was not married yet; there was that one straw she could cling to.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CHALLENGE.

NAN was in her garden—among the white Canterbury bells, the glowing scarlet geraniums, the pansies, the pinks, the musk, the variegated sweet-williams ; bees were humming and butterflies fluttering in the brilliant sunshine ; the honeysuckle clusters, now fully out, and the abundant roses sent abroad their fragrance through all the warm wavering air. Her father was with her. It was of Mrs. Hume's visit they were talking.

“ And I must keep repeating this to you, Nan,” said he, “ for your guidance in after days. I hope they will treat you well ; but if they should be resentful—if they

should say anything—then you have your answer. If they say, ‘Your father was so-and-so or so-and-so; and it was presumption on your part to come into our family,’ you can say, ‘Yes, it is true my father was so-and-so or so-and-so; but people cannot always be what they would like to be. People are not all born rich, and able to choose for themselves what lives they will lead. Circumstances have a hard grip on the poor and ill-educated——’”

“If you think I am going to make any apology for you, Dodo,” she said, in hot indignation, “then you are quite entirely mistaken. An apology? Yes, indeed!”

“But above all,” he went on, gently, “your chief answer must be that you did not ask to enter their family. It was none of your seeking. And it was none of mine —no, indeed, it was none of mine. I would rather . . . But when I saw you were inclined towards him—when you told

me your story — then that was enough : then there was nothing for it but to look forward and hope for the best. The best ? —why of course. It will be all right, Nan,” he continued, with much cheerfulness. “ Remember, you will have a young husband to take your part — a young fellow who has plenty of independence and pluck—I can see that well: he won’t leave you unprotected—he will be there to stand by you—— ”

“ I wish you would not talk like that, Dodo,” said she, in a low voice.

“ Are we children ? ” he demanded, “ that we are afraid to face what lies before us ? Once let me see you happily settled—comfortably and happily settled—and then whatever comes to me, next week, next year, any year, won’t be of very much consequence, I think ! ”

And when Sidney came out, as he had promised to do, Nan’s father was still in the same resolutely optimistic mood.

“I wish,” said he, “you would take this girl and make her drive you down to Henley bridge, and give her a look at the river. She lives far too humdrum a life up here—among a lot of flowers——”

“And Henley regatta,” said Sidney, promptly falling in with the suggestion, “is one of the most beautiful things in England. Very seldom they get a morning like this for it.”

“But won’t you come with us, Dodo?” said she, regarding him.

“No, no,” he made answer, impatiently. “The driving would jolt my arm. Now go away and get ready; and I’ll tell them about the phaeton.”

And thus it was that, a little while thereafter, Nan and Sidney had left the solitude of the beechwoods, and were driving into Henley, upon which, on this auspicious morning, all kinds of vehicles were seen to be converging. But it was not of the boat-races they were thinking; it was of some-

thing far more important; nothing less than—a Book!

“For I must keep myself out of the general reproach,” he said, blithely enough. “Every other Oxford Fellow you meet has some great object in his mind—and it never comes to anything. But now that I have my materials in a kind of arrangement—now that I begin to see my way—I must actually set to work. And then the Mater will be satisfied at last: my name on a title-page—that has always been one of her secret ambitions. It may be a good book or a bad book; but at least it can be elegantly bound, and presented to friends. And I shouldn’t wonder if the publisher made a little profit: we are a large family.”

He laughed.

“A book is all right. Yes, she will permit of that, and even approve; but she won’t go further—she won’t descend lower. She has heard that I know a number of writing-men—men who write for the reviews

and the newspapers; and I fancy she is haunted by a horrible misgiving that sooner or later I may lapse into journalism. Journalism—for any one connected with the august Humes and Hays—it would be too sacrilegious.”

“But I should like to have you write for the newspapers and the reviews, Sidney,” said she, in her bold way. “I should like your name to be known to the public. And think what a public the English-reading public is—Australia, Canada, America—a public to think of!”

“I am afraid you are not a person of lofty mind, Nan,” said he. “Besides it’s an awful shame of amateurs to step in and take the bread out of the mouth of the professionals—the people who have to earn their living by journalism. It’s difficult enough for them, I suppose, at the best. Why, I heard the other day of a poor wretch who was in such straits to get a taking topic that he set to and concocted

a sham advertisement, paid five shillings for its insertion in an evening journal, then he took it as the text of an article—on the unblushing luxury of the fashionable classes, I think it was—and carried both article and advertisement to his Editor, the advertisement being shown as a proof that here was something that urgently wanted writing about. Poor chap!—even if he got two guineas for the article, five shillings is a long percentage to pay——”

He did not conclude the sentence: he suddenly found Mrs. Spink's eyes fixed on him. She was walking along the highway—it was a portion of the Fair Mile they had arrived at—and she was alone but for a gaunt and shaggy deer-hound that was trotting after her. The next instant her eyes were turned upon Nan—swiftly and covertly. With some kind of involuntary impulse, Sidney raised his hat; but she took no notice; she was now gazing blankly along the great avenue.

“ Haughty person,” he remarked, without much concern.

“ Who is she ? ” Nan inquired.

“ She is what they call a reduced gentlewoman, who acts as companion to Lady Monks-Hatton. And when she and Lady Helen called on me at All Souls’, I did my little best for them ; I gave them what my poor rooms could afford ; she need not be so arrogant.”

“ Oh, Lady Helen called on you at All Souls’ ? ” said Nan, somewhat coldly.

“ I met them in the High, by accident,” he explained ; “ and I gave them lunch ; I did what I could ; she need not be so forgetful. I detest pride. And I also detest impertinence : she had a good stare at you, Nan.”

“ Yes, indeed,” said Nan, with conscious colour in her face. She knew quite well what suspicions might be aroused by the fact of her conspicuously driving this young man about.

Nor was this the only acquaintance they were destined to encounter. As they were passing down Hart Street on their way to the crowded bridge, who should cross just ahead of them but Dick Erridge ? He was in an open fly; apparently he had come from the station, and was on his way to the Red Lion. Dick, regarding these two with evident surprise, had nevertheless sufficient presence of mind to salute the young lady ; she bowed to him in return ; and then the two carriages went their divergent ways, the phaeton making slow progress through the scattered groups.

But Nan had become more and more embarrassed.

“ Sidney,” she said, in an undertone, “ I should like to get away from all these people—I do not know how many more may recognise us. What do you say—shall we cross the bridge, and get away up into the lonely country ?—I know the quieter

byways. I'm not used to a crowd ; and I don't like the people staring."

" By all means," said he at once ; surely to be alone with Nan in the silent woodland ways was more to him than all this hubbub of cheering and waving of hats and handkerchiefs. Of course as they crossed the bridge they caught a glimpse of the brilliant spectacle ; the flags, and striped awnings, and scarlet parasols ; the great mass of rowing-boats and punts lining each side of the stream ; and out in the middle two small white dots coming along—the competitors in a sculling match—while the umpire's steam-launch accompanied the rival craft. It was no hardship for them to turn from that many-coloured, wide-murmuring scene. They drove on, by the Hurley and Maidenhead highway, until they reached the foot of a long ascent ; then they surrendered the phaeton to the tiny groom ; and presently they were making upward for the solitary heights—leaving

the valley gradually below them, until the red roofs of the town, and even the four little turrets on the top of St. Mary's tower, had entirely disappeared; while placidly and happily they went wandering forward into a wide and silent country, with strips of green corn-land here and there, that stretched away to a serrated horizon-line of wooded hill, faintly and filmily blue against the distant sky.

Meantime Dick Erridge had arrived at the door of the Red Lion. But he did not get down from the cab. He handed out his light travelling-bag; said he assumed that the house was full; asked if they would kindly try to get him a room in the town; and then he told the driver to drive out to Crowhurst. There was a blind and blank look in his face—all the jauntiness gone from him—the straw hat with its band of smart ribbon seemed out of keeping with his air of sombre concern.

When he arrived at Crowhurst, he

found Mr. Summers at the gate, which he was in the act of opening.

“Well, well,” said Nan’s father, in a most friendly way, “who would have expected you of all people to turn your back on Henley Regatta?”

The young man paid and dismissed the cabman. Then he entered by the gate.

“You’re not looking well, old chap,” said Mr. Summers, regarding him. “Come in and have a nip of brandy.”

“Well, I will,” Dick made answer; and he followed his host into the house, and into the dining-room, and stood by while the cellaret was being opened. “Travelling all night, don’t you know—couldn’t get away till the last minute—my grandfather is a nailer when he wants people to dance attendance on him.”

The brandy seemed to revive him somewhat.

“I’ll tell you in one second how I came to turn my back on Henley,” he proceeded.

“I was driving from the station to the Red Lion. I saw something—that rather made me jump. And if you say that I’m mistaken, well then, the Regatta may go hang ; and if you say I am not mistaken, then Henley Regatta is no place for me. Only I seemed to want to know just at once ; and so I made the cabman drive right on. And what I saw was this : I saw Miss Nan driving ; and her companion was that young fellow Hume—Sidney Hume. Of course there may be nothing in it——”

“There’s something in it, Dick,” said Nan’s father, quietly—perhaps rather pityingly.

“Oh, there is, is there ?” the young man repeated. “There is something in it, then ? They have made it up in my absence ?” He paused for a moment, perhaps the better to conceal his mortification. “Rather rough, I call it. I think you will admit yourself that it is *rather* rough.”

"Well, to tell you the truth, Dick," Mr. Summers said, "it all came about in an unexpected kind of way. And I am sure there was nothing underhand; I am certain there was no thought of doing anything unfair to you. You must remember that neither of them could have known you had any views—I don't suppose you said anything to Nan—and then again you didn't put in much of an appearance, now did you?—"

"There it is—that's where it is!" exclaimed the young man bitterly. "That's the result of being kept buried in a hole of a sea-side village, all because my grandfather keeps groaning with lumbago. Can I cure lumbago? Do I look like a cure for lumbago?"

He took a turn or two up and down, and even went to the window, to conceal his profound chagrin. Then he came back.

"Well, I've got to show I'm not a bounder," he said. "I mean to show

those two I know what's what. I'm not going to make a fuss, like one of those Johnnies on the stage, made up with white faces and black eyebrows, and slouching round street-corners with a dagger in their hand. I'm not built that way. Still—still I think it a *little* rough."

He suddenly fixed his regard on two instruments that Mr. Summers had been carrying when he was met at the gate; one was a pair of powerful steel pincers, the other was an iron hook.

"Where were you going when I came along?" he asked; clearly he had no mind to return to the river.

"Well," said Summers, "there is a farmer some little way from here who has gone and put barbed wire all through his hedges—by the public road—and the hedges are tall, so that you don't notice the wire—and in fact, the day before yesterday, Nan was reaching at some wild roses, and she stumbled a bit, and scratched

all her wrist. It's a monstrous shame, I think—barbed wire is illegal—or ought to be——”

“Why, you could summons the infernal beast!” cried Dick, his pent-up vexation finding vent at last, on a specific object. “Or, I'll tell you what's better, now: you and I will start off this very minute; and we'll go to the farmer; and you'll talk to him fair and square and moderate; and then he'll give you some cheek; and then you just hit him a clip on the side of the head that'll make him think he is a dear sweet baby-child again, with the mother o' Moses stretching him on her knees. That's just what we'll do now. You think your one arm isn't enough to knock the sawdust out of any Turnip-Johnny in the country? If it comes to that, I'd rather like to have a try in myself. I'm not a big 'un; but I can pound a bolster; we'll see—we'll see. Come along; I think we can make old Sheep-dip sit up!”

"No, no," said Mr. Summers, with a laugh at the young man's ferocity. "Peaceable ways are best, Dick. If you like to go along with me, I'll keep snip-snipping with the pincers, and you can take the hook and haul the wire through the hedge, and heave it away, or hide it in a ditch. It's quite a favourite neighbourhood of Nan's; she likes to loiter about searching the hedges for plants and things. And of course a man would think nothing of a scratch; but it's different with a girl's wrist—Nan tried to hide it with her glove—but I found it out——"

"I think," said Erridge, with grim significance, "that if old Thorley's-food-for-cattle were to happen to come along while we are destroying his fence, there might be a little difference of opinion: yes, just a little friendly difference of opinion. And I wonder what he'd be like when we had done with him!"

But as they moved away from the

house, his own private sorrows resumed their sway.

“Not that I have anything to complain of,” he said, with a magnanimity that might have been absent from greater minds. “Perhaps I was a little backward in coming forward; but that was my own lookout; I wanted to give public notice and have everything aboveboard. Then the lumbago, that confounded lumbago: hard luck I call it: for what use was I? I’m not a hospital nurse, with a bib and tucker, and a pair of scissors dangling by her side. Of course I had my reasons: the old gentleman is going to leave me a little bit—so he kept telling me, anyway, when he wasn’t howling and growling and groaning like a hedgehog on a hot girdle. No; I don’t suppose I’ve anything to complain of; but all the same, when you get a thing sprung on you like this, when you have been looking forward to domestic felicity, and a smart dinner-table, and doing your friends well when they

come to see you ; and then all of a sudden you're brought up, as if you'd burst your head against a flint wall—another fellow driving with her, don't you know : well, I call it a little bit rough—I call it just a little bit rough."

"Ah, well, my good chap," said Mr. Summers, with his grave eyes grown pensive, "there are many disappointments in life—but you are young——"

"Oh, look here," said Dick Erridge, interrupting without scruple, "I'm not going to have that consolation. I know what they say ; there's as good fish in the sea as ever were caught. That's all blossoming tomfoolery ; find me her match anywhere betwixt here and the Land's End, and then I'll believe those Solomon-Ecclesiasticus idiots. And suppose it was true ; suppose there's as good fish in the sea as ever was caught ; how are you going to catch 'em ? I had my chance—well, I ought to say that perhaps I had my chance, and missed

it, like a blamed jackass. But I don't bear malice. I'll show them I'm not a bounder——”

“ You're a right good fellow, Dick,” said Mr. Summers. “ And sometimes I have thought—But then, you see, Nan is peculiar —she has been peculiarly situated ; she has been brought up in a different kind of way. And I hope it will be all right. I think you can fairly believe it was no ambition of mine, her going among those people. No ; nor of hers, either. But here in a kind of chance way this young fellow comes along —handsome enough to dazzle any girl's eyes—and a fine young fellow besides—yes, I will say that—modest and manly and honest, if ever I met any human being that was so ; and by a sort of accident, as it were, all this happens ; and the main thing—the very fortunate thing that I can see about it is that Nan looks happy. And I suppose I should be satisfied too. You see, Dick, I have been a little bit anxious now and

again, in case anything should happen to me——”

“I like that!” the younger man broke in, scornfully—“I like that! About the strongest man in the length and breadth of this country talking like that! But listen to what I’m going to say now, and this is my last word. If anything should happen—and nothing is going to happen—but what I want to say is this: that the daughter of Jim Summers, whether she’s married or whether she’s single, will never want for a true friend as long as this humble person has the breath of life left in him.”

“I can believe that,” Mr. Summers said, slowly, and in an undertone. “I know you, Dick.”

And while these two now proceeded to snip the scoundrelly wire, and haul it out, and heave it away, so that Nan’s pretty wrists should not again be scratched, Nan herself and her lover were away in the solitudes beyond and above the Thames—

by Culham and Cockpoll Green and Crazy Hill—wandering along the lonely lanes, watching the cloud-shadows steal over the blue-green wheat, or some recently harrowed field flare red in the sun; while ever and always they had the same old story, magic and wonderful, to repeat to each other a thousand times in the course of an hour. The cream-coloured black-maned Captain had an easy time of it; the phaeton was a light one, and the groom a mere feather-weight; and now, when they were in out-of-the-way neighbourhoods, they had almost given up the pretence of driving. The circus-looking animal, as Mr. Summers had unfairly called that most excellent creature, was allowed to walk both heights and hollows and even level plains. For Sidney and she had a marvellous number of things to talk of—the passionate hopes and aspirations of youth, doubts to be resolved away, courage to be summoned up, and still again the old assurances to be given. Not

that Nan was over-timid and apprehensive. She was naturally of a gay disposition, well pleased with the passing hour, especially when the sun was shining, and the winds were soft, and there were wild-roses along the highway. But on one point she could not attain to her lover's confidence.

"No, no, Sidney," said she, laughing and shaking her head; "you can make me believe a good deal, but not that. I know what your mother thinks of me, and what she is likely to think. I am a dangerous person. All the time she was in the room at Crowhurst she was examining me; I felt her eyes upon me——"

"Yes, naturally, as a stranger!" he exclaimed.

"No, no; more than that," said Nan. "She suspected—and she suspects me now."

"There, I can convince you you are wrong," he rejoined. "There is no more suspicion in the matter. Last night I

informed her, in set terms, that I meant to marry you or no one."

She looked up quickly. "Why did you not tell me that before?"

"Well," said he, with a trifle of embarrassment, "I was waiting until the Mater and I had had some further talk, so that I could bring you a message from her."

"So you have told her?" said Nan, thoughtfully. "Then I am no longer merely suspected. Now I am her enemy."

"Oh, stuff and nonsense!" he cried. "Do you think she sets such store by her futile schemes? Do you think she cannot recognise the impossible as well as any one else? There is no question of compulsion. She knows I am my own master; and if the worst came to the worst——"

At this moment they happened to be passing an odd little wayside public-house, and a sudden thought struck his fancy.

"Shall we stop and have a bit of lunch, Nan," said he.

"Very well," she answered, for it was mid-day, and they had walked many miles.

So they sate down on the outside bench ; the phaeton, coming up, was brought to a standstill, and a shock-headed boy despatched for a pail of water for the horse ; and by-and-by an old woman brought the two travellers some bread, and a piece of cheese, and a couple of bottles of ginger-beer, all of which they consumed with the greatest apparent satisfaction.

"It is good to practise economy," said he, with some dark amusement in his eyes, "in view of contingencies."

"I wish for no better fare," said Nan ; she was a contented kind of a lass.

But while they were thus divinely idle and unconcerned, Mrs. Hume had been neither the one nor the other. Swiftly and discreetly she had been pursuing her inquiries ; she had no longer a thought for

the busy river and her many friends there ; even her dearest Helen, at the lawn at Monks-Hatton Hall, had to be neglected—so terrible was this danger that threatened. And as it chanced, her desperate efforts were rewarded in a way she could not have anticipated ; she could hardly believe in her astonishing good fortune ; now she could assure herself that her precious son—her Benjamin—the last of all her brilliant family—was to be saved from destruction.

Yet she was outwardly calm when she next encountered him—which was on his return home in the afternoon.

“ What ? ” he said. “ I thought you would be over at the Hall.”

“ No,” she made answer, quietly. “ I wished to have the earliest opportunity of conveying to you a little piece of news I have received to-day. It is about some friends of yours. You remember what you told me last night. I said nothing, for it is not a thing to be argued about ; but I

felt certain you had fallen into rather incomprehensible company; and so I have been making inquiries. My dear boy, you have been misinformed. Mr. Summers is not an ex-trainer of race-horses—though that would have been bad enough, if you had been so infatuated as to think of associating any one connected with him with our family. No; Mr. Summers is not an ex-trainer; but he is an ex-champion—a pugilist—a common prize-fighter——”

“It is ridiculous rubbish!” he exclaimed, indignantly. “Do you suppose a pugilist would have enough money to educate his daughter in that way—to live in that way——”

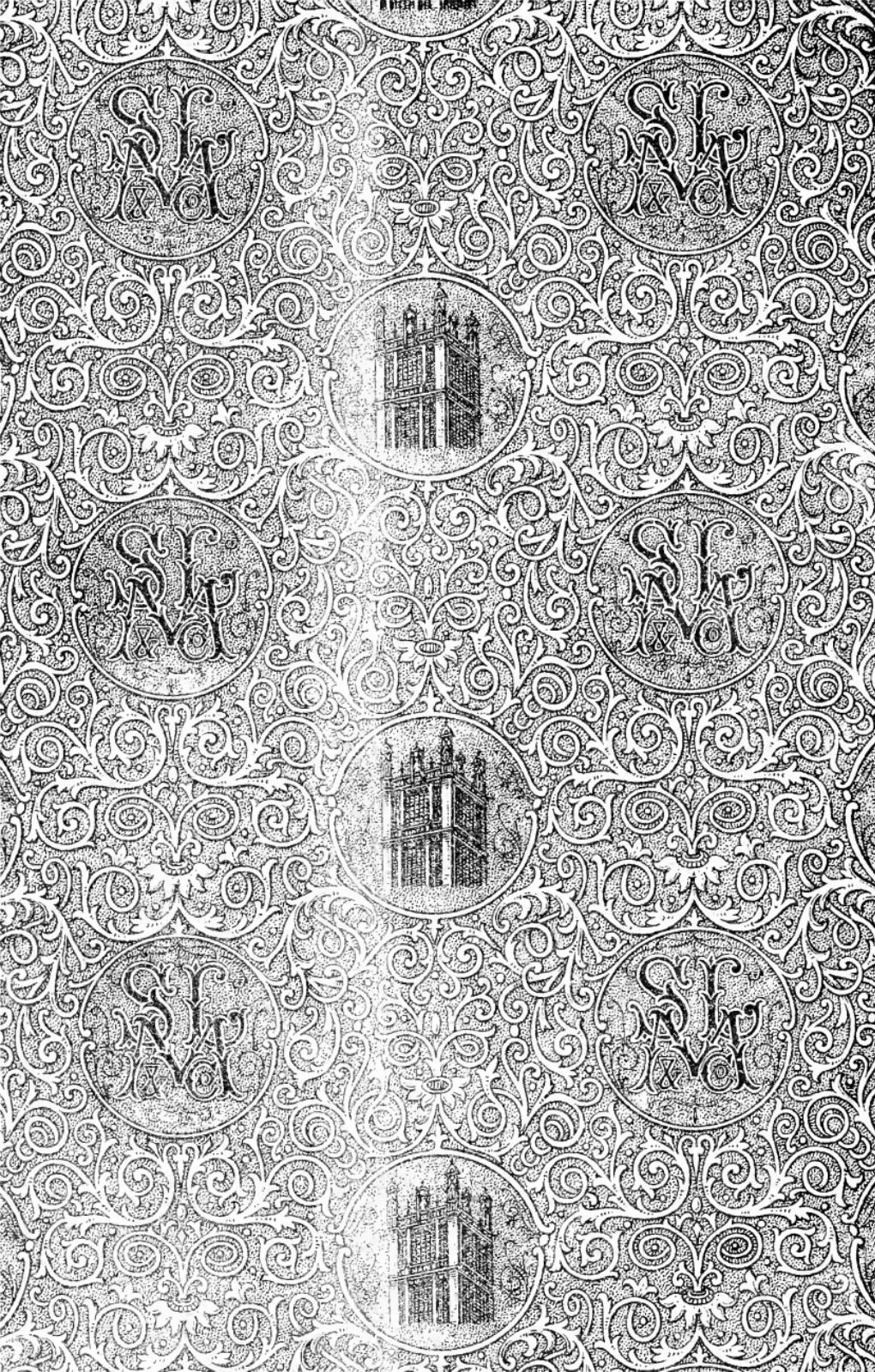
“Nevertheless it is true,” she replied, in a tranquil manner. “I can give you my authorities. Why, he is well known in the town — familiarly spoken of—though he lives apart there as a sort of outcast, with hardly any one to visit him but a kind of creature who keeps a public-house in Rich-

mond. And these are the acquaintances you appear to have made ! At all events, if you will think for a moment of the family—or rather, the families—to which you belong, I imagine you will pause a little before asking them to receive the daughter of a common prize-fighter. That would be something too much of outrageous folly ! ”

She left him, the better to let the blow strike home. And he stood stunned and bewildered ; for despite his angry denial—first of all to her, and now to himself—there were some strange coincidences that came surging into his memory, assuming a greater and more startling importance the longer he thought of them.

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